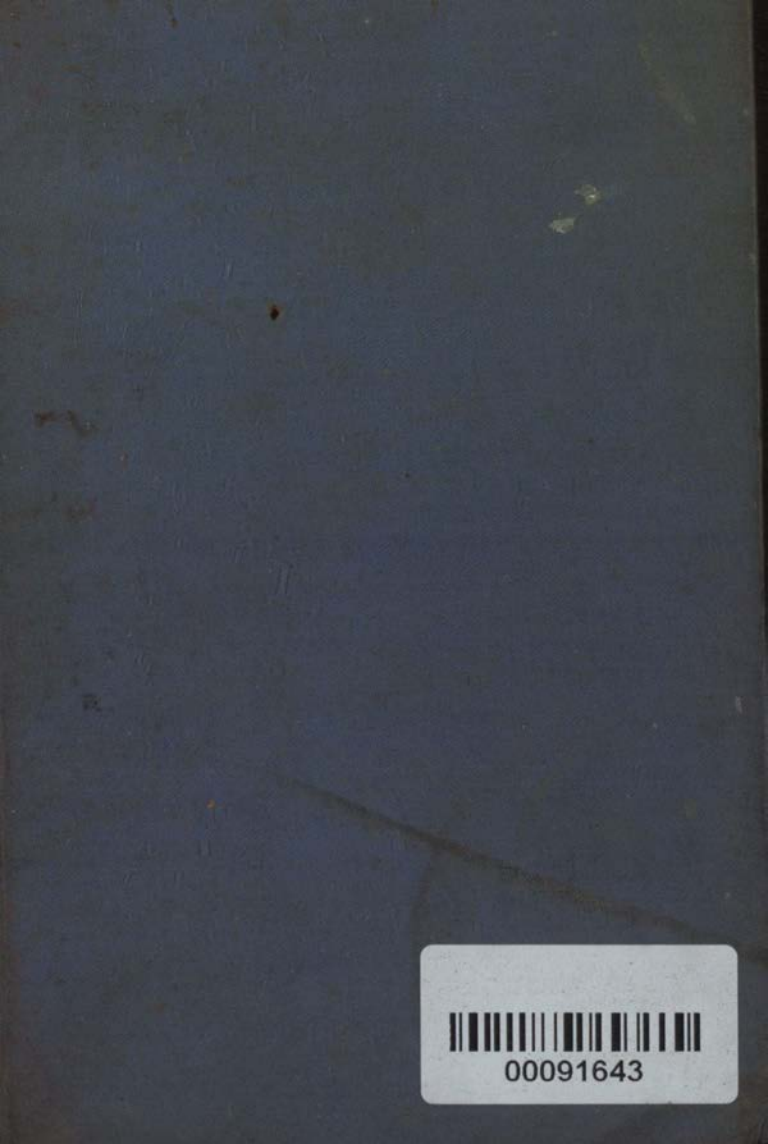
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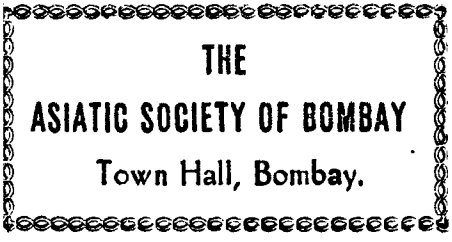

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STUDIES IN THE ORIENT.

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Oxford:
ALDEN & CO. LTD., BOCARDO PRESS.
LONDON:
SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT AND CO. LTD.

LIFE AND ITS PUPPETS

BEING

Stories from India and the West

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BY

OTTO ROTHFELD, B.A., F.R.G.S.

(INDIAN CIVIL SERVICE)

AUTHOR OF "INDIAN DUST"

LIBRARY OF THE BOMBAY BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC

KX-R-246

London

G. BELL & SONS, LTD.

1911

This Edition is issued for circulation in India and the Colonies.

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PREFACE

THIS book must begin with an apology. For it has broken the most essential canon of "British Art." That canon is that the artist—be he writer, painter, sculptor, or actor—must never vary his subject. The painter who has once succeeded with a picture of ships in rough seas must in future go on painting rough seas and ships till he dies. The writer who has once written a romance of the Balkans must never cease writing Balkan extravaganzas. The musician—but fortunately the British musician need hardly be considered.

So by the laws of the lending libraries these stories should have been confined to India and to India only. I hasten, therefore, to absolve myself at least from the guilt of "false pretences" by at once admitting that in three of the stories I have abandoned India for England and Scotland. In doing so I have followed caprice rather than sound commercial principles; and I am at

a loss to know what defence to plead. I might, it is true, argue gravely that I wished to demonstrate that human life is at bottom the same, whether in East or West,—a matter chiefly of nutrition and reproduction. And I might make a good thing of this argument with the serious. Or I might plead that the treatment of life's material through the medium of the same temperament must at least be similar, whatever the latitude or longitude. And this would, I imagine, appeal to the soulful. But I prefer rather to base my excuse upon personal likings, and to say frankly that, though I share in both the above opinions, yet I have broken "the law of the profits" chiefly because I wished so to do.

Incidentally, I should like to hope that these stories and those of "Indian Dust" may succeed in conveying some hints of the real Indian mind—the mind at least of the Indian of Rajputana and Gujarat—to the Englishman in England. The Englishman in India either knows it already or he will never know, being wilfully blind. But it is, after all, worth knowing.

One story in this book can hardly be called a "short story." But at a time when publishers

(and presumably readers) insist on a round hundred thousand of words—mostly otiose—in a novel, I do not know how else to describe it. It is adapted from an incident mentioned in that precious storehouse of Rajput lore, Tod's *Rajasthan*.

O. R.

Bombay Presidency,
March, 1911.

RADHA'S LAMENT TO KRISHNA

[Imitated from the Gujarati of the Princess Mirábai]

Love, ah belovéd?—Then learn of love.
Its stroke is the flash of a golden dart,
Its bond a chain to the Gods above,
Its sanctuary is a selfless heart,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

But weary the eye that thou hast for me,
And chill to my soul is thy passing mien;
For thy warmth and thy glow are for Rukhmini,
And thy thought is dead to the love that 's been,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

To Rukhmini bloom; but my life is grief.
And she is enriched with golden fruit,
While I press to my breast a sapless leaf,
And catch from her door the note of thy flute,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

Leave me, belovéd; my darling, go!
For bright are the torches of Rukhmini,
And she waits with kisses. I stay with woe,
But I clothe my grief with my love for thee,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

Radha's Lament to Krishna

Where the new love waits thou hast gone thy way
And never again wilt thou push my door.
But I loved too much to have said thee nay,
And tears are less than the love I bore,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

Take back the plumes of curious jade,
Take back the ear-rings, the belt of gold,
Bracelets of topaz, veils of brocade,
Take all—but—I keep the tales of old,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

For I have been loved, and I have been kissed,
Knew joy, too brief, by my Krishna's side;
And the path of woman I have not missed,
For I knew God living before I died,
Belovéd, my belovéd.

HEART'S EASE

"Belli teterrima causa."—HORACE.

LIFE AND ITS PUPPETS

HEART'S EASE

CHAPTER I

THROUGH the open casement the morning sun smote sharply into the room and lit up the bright colours of woollen pile carpets from Amritsar and Hyderabad, and bright cushions and brocades from the markets of Surat and small hidden shops in Ahmedabad. Through the Saracenic arches of the window could be seen the bright unclouded blue of the sky and the waving leaves of a palm-tree. Underneath lay the mosque attached to the palace, and beyond it the houses of the richer citizens, with flat roofs and quaint carved balconies, and white walls adorned with paintings of the Puranic gods of India and the adventures of the amorous Krishna. Beyond the enclosing fortress walls the plain stretched for miles to the rising hills of Mewar.

The dancing-girl Dilaram sat in the centre of

the room on a heap of cushions before a square mirror with a heavy frame of silver, parcel-gilt. Two servant-maids moved lightly behind and beside her, and plaited her hair and fetched her jewels. But her eyes turned with longing to the casement and gazed out upon the broad free plains and the blue clear sky.

"What sort of a place is this!" she said, stretching herself wearily. "Here is nothing to do, no pleasure, no gaiety; there is only this prison of the palace walls. Allah! If only there were something new! But every day is like the other. What a place, in the name of the thousand jinns!"

For Dilaram, the mistress and companion of the Mussulman Commander of the fort, was very weary, and life had grown heavy to her in the little frontier garrison where she lived. She had come in the train of Muzaffar Khan, the Mussulman general, to Untala, the fortress where he had been posted to command the Rajput marches, over six months before, from the lively bazars and pleasant gaieties of Ajmere. Here in the little walled town, with its routine of military duties and its alien, half-hostile people, she felt estranged, severed from all she knew and had cared for. The days passed wearily, as she sat at her windows and watched the open

expanse of the plains, and below her the dull streets and the square parade-ground, with its sharp cries of command and the monotonous round of drill and exercises. She had recreation only after dusk, when torches were lit in her rooms and she sang and thrummed on the zither and made the evening hours gay for her soldier lover. But she was used to play men against each other, and liked to catch in their quick glances the gleam of jealousy and to kindle the fires of desire in an admiring circle. Here there was only one, her proclaimed and admitted lover, and he was too often tired from the accomplishment of dull duties, and at least secure of a fidelity that there was no one else to test. In truth she was very weary. She yawned and stretched her arms lazily.

"Oh, you girls," she said, "children of Satan, what are you doing? How long am I to be kept here waiting by you who are the shames of your misbegotten mothers?"

The maids had learnt to know these humours and avoid them. They made no answer, but with deft fingers smoothed the sleek tresses that it was their task to adorn, and gently pressed and rubbed the slack muscles of the soft limbs.

Dilaram, the dancing-girl from Ajmere, had

risen late, long after her lover had said the prayers that precede the dawn in the little mosque which he had built at the gates of his palace. Then she had bathed in the marble bathroom which adjoined her couch. Her maids stood beside her as she bathed, and threw over her shoulders and body showers of warmed and perfumed water from graceful ewers and urns of unbaked clay. They scattered powdered soap and prepared earths upon her and rubbed them into foam and laved her again with fresh showers of water. As the water trickled down her limbs or fell in drops like pearls from her outstretched arms, the colour of her glistening skin was as of ivory tinted by age to the brown of over-ripe wheat. Her figure was full and plump, like the superb nakedness of a Venetian canvas, and the fair Venus of Titian had no softer curves than the ripened beauty of the dancing-girl. The rounding fullness of her body, from which each intruding hair had from childhood been diligently removed by tweezers and depilatories of lime and orpiment, had the smoothness of a statue and the living opulence of a picture. She was all woman and all life, soft, smooth, and ripe.

Then the servant-maids had rubbed her with rough towels that brought the blood tingling to

the pores of the skin; and with gentle fingers had smoothed away the first hint of wrinkles from her brow and weary eyes, and had painted the palms of her hands and the soles of her dainty untwisted feet with the oils expressed from the leaves of henna. At the corners of the eyes, with little flattened sticks they had dabbed a few grains of collyrium, that their weariness should be refreshed and their brilliance made more dazzling. On her cheeks they had dusted a powder of rice and gold-dust mingled in parts by a nice perfection. They trimmed the nails of her fingers and toes, and pushed back the growing skin with little pieces of cane, and they polished the nails with acids rubbed in with the cured hide of antelope.

Now they were finished with the tasks of cleanliness and ablution and were busied with the arts of adornment. The first stage had been only that of every woman of the better classes, an attainment of a worthy bodily cleanliness, fit for a husband's bed or the companionship of her children. It now remained to array her as beseemed the mistress of a high officer of state, the loved toy of a generous prince.

First they had rubbed extracts of henna into the hair, that its black should be enriched with

the shot colours of hidden fire. Then upon it they sprinkled oils squeezed out in great wooden mortars from the pods of ripened tamarinds, perfumed with the distillations of Persian roses. Then carefully they parted the glossy scented hair in the centre and drew it smoothly round the forehead to the ears, and caught it again behind and plaited it into a long full plait.

"How long you are over your task to-day," cried Dilaram, impatiently. "I am so tired of your stupid fingers. Be quick, or you shall be beaten."

"On our eyes be it," said the girls.

And they ran quickly to coffers and cupboards, and took forth garments of silk and caskets of jewels. Over her legs were drawn the *ijár* or trousers of gold brocade, scarlet silk with flowered patterns in gold thread, which fitted tightly from ankle to knee and were wide and loose over the thighs and hips. At the waist they were fastened by silk cords, ended in nuts of gold wire and coloured tassels. The breasts were enclosed and supported in a corslet of green satin, on which pearls had been stitched in the patterns of conventional foliage. From shoulders to below the knees hung the stiff folds of the sleeved mantle or *peshevaz* made of rich brocaded stuffs that

rustled at every movement. On her head was a cap plumed with a white aigrette, fastened by a brooch on which was set a ruby *en carbochon* as big as a walnut. At its side was pinned a plume of white jade set with diamonds and rubies in enamel.

Then they placed before her the jewels from which she should choose that which was suitable to the day. And the ornaments were not merely things of decoration and of price, but rather they had each their own meaning and their implication. For the stones and their settings were the symbolic expression of deep mysterious thoughts and the instruments of a magical significance. They had been designed by artists who sought in the forms of colour and pattern with delicate edges and enamelled supports and conventional sprays of foliage to achieve not the mere imitation in unsuitable material of external objects, but the verities of unknown influences and suggested powers of a supernatural thought. On cartouches were engraved the sacred symbols of the Jewish Cabbalists and that sign of the Swastika which from the time of the Bronze Age had presented the beneficent motions of the sun. On amulets of white jade were inscribed in Arabic characters the highest names of the Most High.

There were little boxes of chased gold in which were enclosed written charms which protected the wearer from the malice of jinns and the malevolence of the Evil Eye. On heart-shaped plates of silver was cut the sacred hand which remains in the escutcheon of British baronets, or there were inscribed the names of "Tileth" and the imprecation "Adam and Eve away from here". Necklaces and waistbelts were arranged of seven stones in the order of the days of the week, in turn resistant to the diurnal constellations. In the evil conjunction of the sun, the ruby was propitious, and against lunar influences the diamond was remedial. On the day of Mars and War the coral should be trusted, and the zircon was efficacious against Mercury, known as Buddha. The pearl was for wear when Jupiter was dangerous. The cat's-eye deflected the baleful radiances of Venus, and in the ascending node the emerald was sovereign. There were bracelets that bore the name of "Ali", and anklets from which hung pendants in shape of cloves and pendants of silver cowries. There were enamels from Persia and *Champlevé* enamels from the Sikh workers who had found a home in the pink city of Jaipur. In the golden plaques were little depressions which were filled with oxides of

various metals, fixed by the nicely varied temperature of fire.

From among her treasures she selected slowly and with a reflective pleasure the ornaments which responded to her desires. On her head, at the parting of her hair and along the outlines of her forehead she bound a broad band of topazes that they might bring her fame and happiness and a happy length of days. From the cartilage between the nostrils she hung a narrow circlet of gold with a bunch of reddening pearls. On her neck she fastened a torque of plain gold, and below it a carcanet of rubies and pearls. Above her elbow was a heavy armlet, ending in two lions' heads. She had rings on nearly every finger, and bracelets of ivory and of links of gold. On her feet were anklets with little bells, which clashed softly as she walked. Then she went to the casement, and reclined on the cushions on the window-seat while the maids locked away the jewellery and the dresses that she had not chosen. A page-boy of ten years of age, a pretty boy from the northern hills, with dark eyes and pink cheeks, fetched her a water-pipe of *bidri* ware, with the clay bowl set with turquoises. She caressed the boy's cheek softly with her hand and smiled upon him and set the amber mouth-

piece of the pipe to her lips. Then the girls began to prattle to her of the morning's uneventful news and the petty gossip of the dull bazar. But she stopped them impatiently.

"I have no wish to hear," she said. "Each day you bring the same stale tales from the barber's wife. It is all weariness, and I would be quiet." Then a few minutes later she sent the page-boy off.

"Go to the exalted threshold," she said, "and tell the Lord, the Commander-in-chief, that his slave would be honoured with his presence."

The servant-maids asked her leave to depart, when the boy had gone.

"Go, go!" she said. "You are better off than I, for you can go to the courtyard and whisper to the soldiers, and even this little place can give you amusement. But what is there here for me?"

Muzaffar Khan, the commander, was not in the best of humours when he entered, for he had been disturbed while in open court, and the affairs he had been transacting had been such as to cause annoyance. News had been brought him of fresh turbulence on the Rajput frontier and of ingressions of hostile bands that had seemed to find support from the Rajput chiefs. With all the

pride of the great nobles of the Muslim Court, he despised the Hindu inhabitants of the country as idolaters fated by the decree of inscrutable Providence to servitude in this life and damnation at its close. Personally brave and even reckless as he was, luxury and the endurance of uncontested supremacy had enervated the virtues of energy and foreseeing strategy that his ancestors had derived from their mountain feuds. Wilfully ignorant of the spirit of militant Hinduism and the living tradition of Rajput chivalry, he had no doubt of easy victory whenever he could bring his pampered troops to bear upon their idolatrous levies. He chafed at the orders of a prudent court which restrained him from aggression upon the great Hindu feudatories. To his mind the Rajput clans could never be more than a cause of annoyance by raids, too sudden and tempestuous to be adequately punished, and his aspiration was to lure them to a pitched battle in which his indolent pride could forecast only certain victory and a glory the greater for its demonstration of his superiority to statesmen's calculations.

He frowned at Dilaram as she greeted him, and asked her with some brusqueness what she wanted.

"I wanted you and you only," she answered,

" for I was lonely. Surely you do not object, when I cannot exist without you in this dreadful place."

Muzaffar Khan turned away angrily. " You always tire me now with your complaints. What can I do? I am sent here, and here I must remain. It is no worse for you than it is for me. And surely I give you everything I can. What more do you wish ? "

" What do I wish ? " she replied. " I wish life. I am not made for this sort of thing. I am a dancing-girl, not a poor thing from a Zenana. Get me some excitement, some interest, and I shall be all you want. If not—well, I shall have to leave you. I should be sorry for you alone at Untala, but—I shall not want for friends elsewhere."

Muzaffar Khan had heard these threats before, but he did not like them. He knew the dancing-girl he had got—Dilaram, " Heart's Ease "—and he called her now " Heart's Affliction ".

" What excitement do you think I can get you ? " he exclaimed, angrily. " A fight is the only excitement you are likely to have, and even that I cannot manage, for the Rajputs dare not meet me."

"A fight?" she cried. "The very thing I should like. Is there really any chance of battle ? "

Slowly she wormed from Muzaffar Khan the worries that he suffered on the frontier and the quick incursions of Rajput warriors whom his troops were unable to surprise or force to close quarters. He wanted to catch them in numbers and punish them in a real battle; but he dared not exceed his authority by aggression across the frontier, nor did he wish to risk his garrison troops in the unknown tracks of the Mewar hills and forests.

"Why not send them a challenge?" she said, when he was ended. And she curled up against him as she said it, and stroked his beard with her soft hands. "Challenge them, so that they must come here to attack you. Then you will have gained your aim, and I shall have some interest at last in life."

He tried half reluctantly to oppose her desires with prudence and to represent difficulties. But she would not listen.

"If you will not do a little thing for me, it only shows that you do not want me any longer. The sooner I return to Ajmere, the better. But I do not understand why you try to drive me away, when I am proposing the very thing you said you wanted yourself."

"Whom can I send with a challenge?" he

answered. "Do you think any of my people will venture with a hostile cartél into the Rajput country? It would be obvious death for any man."

She thought a moment. Then she cried: "For any man perhaps it would be death, but not for a woman. Give me the challenge and I will bear it."

Muzaffar Khan started angrily and refused. Time and again he refused with many oaths, while she cajoled and caressed him.

"I am only a dancing-girl," she said, finally, "and my face may be uncovered in public places. And the Rajputs will not hurt a woman. With the challenge I will go, whatever you say, so you had better go and write it out now. Or if not, then, *salám aleikum*, I go to Ajmere, and may peace be with you."

Ultimately with many protestations the Commander had to agree. They sealed the agreement with fond embraces. When at last he left to have the letter of challenge written, she smiled gaily, and called after him a parting word.

"If I succeed and the Rajputs join battle with our forces, see that you send many infidels to hell as my reward, and give me of your love, as I give you of my soul."

Then she turned to her coffers and called her maid, and made ready for her journey. The sunny plain seemed to smile to her as she looked out again from the window, and the blue shadows that tripped over the distant hills beckoned an invitation to adventure and achievement.

She gave herself up to the enjoyment of active power and that sense of effecting change which, to her kind of womanhood, efficient and not merely recipient, had in itself an incessant fascination. She had pride in feeling herself a type of the woman, emancipated and imperious, who can vie with men in dominion and influence, yet reliant above all on the qualities of womanhood and the innate conditions of her sex.

CHAPTER II

THREE days later the Rajput capital was busy with festivity. The sun was dropping, monstrous and red, behind the rugged lines of the mountains over the lake, and the shadows were dark in the corners of the pavilion where the Chief sat with his nobles. The pavilion was on an island in the lake, and the way to it was a causeway of polished stone, white and buttressed with white marble. Now the long causeway was crowded with moving colour, toned by the spreading grey of the twilight, as the people of the city pushed and shouted their way to the island. For the Chief had gone with his nobles to his water-encircled gardens, and the people were desirous of a spectacle. The pavilion was open to all sides, and those who got footing upon the island could gaze at the face and gestures of royalty. At the gate of the garden stood those who should distribute largesse to Brahmans and those who gave alms to the maimed and the needy. And the crowds pushed and shouted and laughed and grew angry and were covered with sweat in the struggle, and

again whipped by the colder breeze that now and then sprang lightly to their faces from the lake. Men carried their little daughters, wrapped in loose mantles, like little women, upon their shoulders that they might share the sight; naked boys clung to their mothers' skirts as they moved through the jostling mass. Here and there a holy man, with long hair curled in a roll on his head, his body clothed only in ashes, struck his iron tongs together and fended his way steadily through the crowd. Rich traders, with golden earrings and loose fatty cheeks, lurched heavily along the road, and their wives, gay mantles drawn like veils over their faces, hurried and scuttled along with frightened titters and the jingle of silvern anklets. Here the seller of sweetmeats, his coat oily and smoky, with little white cap on head, lifted his tray for safety at the tip of his outstretched hand, while under his left arm he carried the wicker stool which should serve as table and counter. There a group of peasants, eyes wide open, wandered in the crowd, yelling loudly for lost children, their women shamefaced at the passing comment of a stranger. In front the pavilion raised its low-arched roof on delicate pilasters amidst the shade of palms and cypresses and acacias. The shadows of the mountains

became one, and the last red arc of the sun vanished behind rocky outlines.

As the last radiance faded from the quickly darkening sky, a line of household servants in procession, bearing great lamps of brass, entered the pleasaunce. Four-foot high were the lamps, and they stood upon tripods of lions' claws. Each brass column supported a triple-guttered saucer, and three wicks upon each shone yellow. At the head of the line marched a mace-bearer, silver mace rapping upon marble floor, and as he marched he chanted in descending notes, "Hail to the Great King, hail!" Then hurriedly the courtiers rose to their feet, their curved scimitars held tight in left hand to their breast, and they bent low to the ground, with their right hand doing triple obeisance, and as they bowed they alike called salutation to their sovran for the coming night and the coming day. A hush fell on the crowds outside, and they stood still for a moment. And then there arose from all alike a hail to the Great King, the descendant of the Sun, the lord of their land and their destinies. Even when the others had ceased, there could still be heard the shrill voice of a little boy piping "Hail to the Great King, hail!" And the Chief heard and smiled, and his heart rejoiced, and he

acknowledged their obeisance and he waved his hand to the crowd where he had heard the blessing of the child.

Then the lamps were set at equal distances down the floor on each side of the middle passage and in front of the lines of nobles. And at the head of the hall, on a raised platform of fretted marble upon soft cushions of crimson brocade, knelt the sovran of the land and the head of the Rajput clans. His curved sword lay across his right knee and its sheath was of green velvet, clasped and feruled with gold cunningly chased. The hilt was of black metal inlaid with red gold in fashion of birds and flowers, and the knob was round and its boss an emerald. But the blade was the best of Damascus, inscribed in the wavy steel with a cartouche and the Arabic characters of the master-armourer's name. And the guard of the hilt, vertically curving like the line of a lily, bore the knocks and usage of hard battle. Two boys stood beside and slightly behind their master and chased away flies and all flying things with whisks of yaks' tails from Tibet. As he looked down the hall and saw his nobles, blood of his blood, and kith of his kin, strong and bold and gay, a warrior clan, his heart was glad, and he smiled again. And at the smile of the King

the tumult was again uplifted. Merrily the infused opium was poured in token of brotherhood from hand to hand out of the spouts of Persian silver urns. Some smelt buds of roses and blossoms of jasmin. Others, as the fumes of opium rose to their brains, rolled back in laughter on the cushions, tears streaming from half-shut eyes. Here one with bloodshot eyeball saw before him visions of galloping horses, and fighting, and the death of men, and he laid his hand on his sword and half pulled it from its scabbard. Others told tales of gross gallantry in a whisper and burst every minute into shrieks of vacant laughter. Boys threaded their way through the lines, scattering rose-water from pierced vases or throwing flowers broadcast on the guests. Once, when a page waited behind one that was in an intoxication of opium delights and drenched him with perfumes, the others shouted with laughter, rocking to and fro like drunken men. Then a tall Rajput began to pelt his neighbour, who was half asleep, with the flowers that lay within reach on the floor.

"Wake up! wake up!" he kept shouting, and, as he shouted, he laughed and pelted the more, till in a last frenzy of laughter he fell prone over the man he had been abusing, and

lay there with heaving sides and turban half over his ear.

The crowd outside gazed on the scene with a sort of envious pride.

"They know how to enjoy themselves," said a peasant in the crowd.

"Are they not royal folk, you village clod?" said his neighbour. "They fight for us and protect us. Why should they not enjoy themselves too?"

"Aye, they are better men than we," said an old man with the look of a worn-out soldier. "Better men are they, in war, in justice, and in pleasure. They are the sons of the kingdom and they have the pleasures and pains of gods."

Two women whispered together and drew their veils over their faces, but left their eyes uncovered. As they whispered, they smiled self-consciously.

"That's a handsome one there," said the one pointing. "The one on the right there, third from the end."

The other demurred, smilingly, and they tittered together.

An old Brahman pushed the women aside none too politely.

"Shameless hussies," he cried, "how does it

befit you to look at men? Where are your husbands, and what are your children doing?"

The women moved away resentfully. "Shameless yourself," muttered the one, spitefully. "Old impotent!"

The Chief talked ever with the two nobles who sat at his right hand and his left, the first in place and the first in pride of the warrior State. True Rajputs they were, both of them, fierce and gallant and tender. Premier nobles of a proud kingdom, they headed contending septs in the State, Chondawats and Saktawats, each descendants of monarchs of the ruling line, fierce unbending men who had covered the Rajput land with a blood-stained pall. Chief of the Chondawats was Naharsinji, lord of Devgadh, a young man not yet thirty, whose reckless bravery in the field, as well as in the forests in the chase of leopard and tiger, had won him the nickname, arrogantly worn, of "Devgadh's mad chief". He bore himself to his sovran with the easy freedom of an equal, and rolled his eyes in mocking merriment at his rival and the long line of his adherents. Behind him, leaning lightly over to talk from time to time, was a young man, his cousin and his second-in-command, Prithviraj the Chondawat. The moustache was still new on his lips and

his eyes sparkled with boyish delight in life and zeal and the keenness of unsatisfied desire. Handsome and light-hearted, his beauty had the fresh salt flavour of vivacity and charm ; and to many he seemed the flower of his clan and a finer light of leading than the fierce chief to whom he was lieutenant and heir-presumptive. He had come in late and the crowd cried him good wishes as he rode to the door. He acknowledged their salutes with a warm smile. As he entered the pavilion the Chief called him and asked him why he was late.

" I saw a pretty face in the crowd," he answered, " a Mussulman singing-girl, and I stayed to look and lost her and was late. I could not get near enough to talk, but others told me she was coming here to your presence. So I rode on."

The Chief smiled kindly as the young man took his place.

On the other side sat Mansingji, the Saktawat leader, an older man, his beard grizzled and his forehead knit like a knot of cord by the upstanding folds of repeated passion. Hereditary chamberlain to the monarch, he had learned in the intrigues of a court to temper the edge of his bravery by the cold touch of versed experience and concession.

But as they talked the noise in the hall grew louder and the revelry more furious. Liquor had been brought in and the warriors quaffed goblets to each others' healths. Some hummed songs in discordant keys. Others shouted words of unmeaning challenge and shook their fists or made foolish gestures. The crowd outside, looking on, wondered and drew closer in a fluttered frightened way, as who should watch tigers at feeding-time in an arena, wondering perchance whether one might not of a sudden overleap the barrier. The Chief at last clapped his hands and raised his voice.

"Mace-bearer," he cried, "the dancing-girls! Bring the dancing-girls and tell them to dance their liveliest."

There was some applause, and then silence fell upon the hall. Here and there a voice still upraised in drunken argument was quickly hushed. Those who tottered on the verge of sleep were raised by their neighbours and their turbans pressed straight upon their heads. Heavy eyelids laboured to open and see clear the reeling forms of men and pillars and walls. Some, who were most overcome, stumbled their doubtful way to the door to seek relief from nausea and oppression in the fresher air blowing straight from

the lake. Moustaches were stroked and the disorder of clothes repaired.

Bowing low to the ground two dancers came in, girls from the South, born among the damp rice-fields and waving palms and monstrous idols and over-decorated temples of Tanjore. Now to the arid plains and rocky hills of Mewar they brought the florid luxuriance of their sensuous dances for a Rajput prince's apartments, giving exotic gladness to the hours saved from the sword and horsemanship. They were wrapt in gauzes of silk on which were woven silver patterns of moon and constellations, and the hems were of broad parallel lines of gold. On the ankles were chains of silver, and above them tinkled, at each step, the striking of little bells. In their ears and at the nostrils was the soft shimmer of pearls, and the coiled glossy hair exhaled scents of sandal and tinging henna. Through the veiling gauzes shone sparkling bodices like rounded cups, upholding the young breasts. The brown of their skin was like soft velvet, smooth to the touch and warmly-tinted. From breast to hips the lithe firm body could be seen uncovered save for the thin moving folds of the silk veil. The full skirts waved round their graceful limbs and each step had a music of bells and rustlings. To the centre of the

pavilion they softly moved and stood observant and observed. Then they clapped their hands to mark the beats of the drum and the melancholy cadences of reed instruments. And they turned slowly upon themselves, their arms half bent and hands rhythmically floating upon the air, while, with heel pressed to heel, they gave little taps to the ground till the bells on their ankles resounded. And first they danced the dance of the cobra; and the note of the clarionet was the note of the snake-charmer's pipe, as he pipes to his dangerous game. And the hands undulated upon the air like the coils of a serpent slowly moving through reeds to the water. Then the veils that they wore took the sheen of a reptile's scales, and the brown of their bodies was as the brown of the cobra's back, and the dark lines of veil and of bodice like the chequered markings of black scales. And at the sound of a discord and a quicker pulsing of drums, the veils rose into clouds of silk over their heads like the extended hoods of a disturbed snake-pair. And the girls rose and crouched in the dance as the cobra moves when it seeks to strike, and the veils over their heads entwined like the writhing crests of terrific serpents. And at last, with a final crash of the drums and a dying wail from the clarionets, they collapsed

suddenly on the floor, skirts in an eddying whirl around them, panting and tired, amidst shouts of approval. Then, after a pause, they began again, and this time they danced the dance of the butterfly and the lotus. And she that was the younger and the more slender was as a hovering butterfly, lightly moving with little flutters round the statelier grace of the opened lotus. The lotus swayed gently from side to side with arms extended and fingers slightly moving, like the petals of a flower expanded upon a calmly swelling water. But the arms of the other moved rapidly up and down at her sides, and her mantle took the curves of swiftly-moving wings. As she circled round her companion, she would stop for an instant with arms and garments still fluttering and again make off and again come back; and her eyes were the eyes of desire and her lips half-opened to kiss. And so the butterfly wooed the flower, till at last she reached the rest she desired upon her bosom, and the dance was at an end. Then the dancers bowed to the lord of the sword and the land, and moved slowly down to the bottom of the hall.

CHAPTER III

THEN a servant came and stood before the dais and spoke. "Great King, there is one outside that is a singing-girl and bears letters from the Mussulman Commander of Untala; and she seeks audience of your Court."

When the servant had spoken, Prithviraj leant over to his cousin and nudged him and whispered that this must be the girl he had seen in the crowd. And both smiled as men do.

But the Chief answered: "It is strange that from a Mussulman, and him an aggressor upon our land and a captain of hostile forces against our authority, should come anything in the way of peace and anything for our pleasure. But since she proclaims herself a singing-girl in his service and bearing letters for our hand, bid her approach in the name of God."

Thereupon a woman entered attended by two musicians, and the woman was Dilaram, the mistress of the Commander of Untala. She carried herself proudly, with a figure that was firm and full and with eyes that were large and heavy and

arrogant. Her glance seemed to bear a challenge to all that met it, but the challenge did not easily discover its meaning. She went steadily up to the King and bowed, and drew herself up again erect and looked him full in the face and handed him a letter. The letter was powdered with saffron and gold and tied with a tinsel thread and sealed with a leaden seal. And the writing was in flowing Persian script. Then she stood quiet, at ease, lazily chewing betel-leaf, while the Rajput ruler broke the seal and handed the letter to a secretary to read. And the letter was as follows :

" To the most noble and most magnanimous of princes, light of the Rajput race, may his days be long in the land—

" After salutation, it is herein represented that, whereas this obedient servant has for many days been honoured neither with cartel nor by visitation from His Grace, it is feared that His Grace has abandoned that close attention with which he was wont to honour his servant, him and all other servants of the One God and of the Chosen Prophet, may the peace and blessing of God be upon Him. And whereas His Grace's obedient servant misdoubts lest this abandonment have been caused by languor, inasmuch as the noble Rajputs have of late not had their spirits fired by

success in war or by the moving glances of fair women and the inspiration of song; therefore he has ventured to send to His Grace's auspicious threshold the jewel of his zanana and the delight of his Court, in the hope and belief that from her songs His Grace may receive needful delectation, and perchance honour his obedient servant with a speedy meeting. And in token thereof she has been instructed by the writer what songs to sing and what language to hold, so that the end desired may be reached. And the poet has said, 'Thou art desirous of meeting; then hearken to the lay of the bulbul, for she brings tidings of the road to thy desire.'

"Accept salutation from the writer, the slave of God, Muzaffar Khan bin 'Itimad Khan, commander of the Emperor's forces, at the stronghold of Untala."

The blood rushed to the brow of Naharsingji, the Chondawat chief, as the letter was read and its irony transpired through the covering sachet of courteous language.

"A gage!" he cried aloud, as the secretary ceased, and, as he spoke, he laid his hand on his sword. "Out with the harlot and let her cool her insolence in the lake. For us, let us ride at once against the arrogant Mussulman, and show him

that we need no invitation to take of his treasures and help ourselves to his delicacies."

But the chief of the Saktawats shook his head and counselled waiting.

"Let those wait who are afraid to dare," broke in the young man fiercely. "The Chondawats require no thought before they avenge their honour. Shall we endure the mockery of a light-of-love and leave her to smile safely?" But the monarch waved him down and beckoned to the girl, who stood calmly looking upon the heated warriors as if content at their anger.

"She is a woman," he said, "and must have safe-conduct. Or are we afraid of our own ears, that we shall not hear her song? Let her sing as she pleases. Perhaps she has another message. And if not—then let her go forth in peace and let us follow in the panoply of war. Sing, woman, and be not afraid. You shall have safety, whatever be your song."

She nodded quietly and walked slowly to her accompanists, who joined her in the middle of the hall. Then she bowed again with haughty courtesy, as one who did formal homage to a greatness which she did not recognize. And then she began her song.

The song was one not easy to hear for the proud

Rajputs. For it was a song of Muslim victory, a song of reviling to idolaters, and of the triumph of the green flag of the One God. And it asked where had vanished the blood of the Rajput race, and it hinted doubts of the virtue of their ancestry. Of the victories of 'Ali she sang, and of the mighty sword with which he clove a road for the Faith through the massed columns of idolaters. And she sang of the prowess of Mahmud of Ghazni and the plunder of the temple of Somnath, and the black stone from its shrine which the conqueror had borne over the hill passes to the cities of Central Asia. Of the Moghuls she sang and their unvanquished armies, and of the land of Ayoddhia and the fabled city of Kanouj converted to the true worship of God, the Indivisible. And the refrain was of mockery and contempt: "Dead the warriors of the kingly race; cows and Brahmans are in sorry case."

As they heard, their brows grew black and many a hand clutched tight upon sword-hilt, and oaths were sworn under breath and pulses beat fast and intermittent. But she sang quietly to the end, her voice clear and sonorous in the excited hall; and the end was a defiance to dare an attack and a challenge from the walls of Untala.

"Shall we listen to this and let her free?"

again cried the Chondawat chief. "Surely she too shall pay."

"She has had my word," answered the King, "and she shall go free from here to Untala. Well has she sung her song and bravely. Let her have a thousand gold mohurs for the compliment to our Rajput honour. But," he added, turning to the singer, standing quietly in the hall, "tell me before you go. What thing or what hope was it that led you so to venture and to dare so much? What did you hope to gain?"

She drew herself up even straighter than before and looked him full in the face.

"What did I hope to gain, Rajput chief? Ten thousand mohurs, my master's love, and the death of ten thousand infidels."

Then having spoken she bowed and left the pavilion. The crowd parted before her, and she disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER IV

THE tumult in the hall was fierce after the Muslim singer had departed, smiling contempt, with her pages and her hostile guards. Outside the crowd muttered and vibrated like dark thunder-clouds before the breaking of a storm. But rage flashed fiercely from the nobles. The Chondawat chief, in an ecstasyof passion, tore his gay turban from his head and hurled it on the ground, stamping upon it like a maddened bull.

"This is disgrace," he cried. "Thus to be defied by a Mussulman soldier of fortune. And his defiance sent us by a woman. And, God of War! who is the woman? A mere strumpet of the stews, the baggage of a thousand appetites. Lord of my country! we need war to wash off this stain in their cheap blood."

As they heard his words, others jumped to their feet and shouted and drew their swords and clattered their shields, smiting steel upon steel. Some rolled their turbans to the ground and their foreheads exposed the swollen arteries, pulsing with wrathful blood. Some smote their breasts,

and cried vain words of passion. Others in dreadful shouts invoked the gods and imprecated their victory and the death of barbaric foemen. Unmeaning shouts, feelings beyond expression and the power of thought, passion turned bestial, minds acted upon by a common and instinctive excitement, not acting and selective, violence and the wish to tear and destroy, these were the living movements of the assembly. It was an orgie not of wine but of the primal blood-lust, the hurt animal ready to rend his aggressor.

But over the yelling, excited crowd the voice of Mansingji, captain of the rival clan, rang like the rounded note of a seasoned instrument. The sounds penetrated to the farthest corners of the room and overcame the discords of rage like a vibrant melody of rational emotion. His face and stature, as he drew himself up and took empire over the swaying crowd, were lit with a nobility of humanity, a higher self-control.

"War we must have," he said, "and victory. War to wipe out disgrace, war to accept a challenge; but also victory to redeem our rights and to establish sovranty over estates too long reft from our crown. Not in a fit of sudden rage let us go to battle, seeking merely instant and inconclusive revenge in the gush of blood and the slaughter of

surprised foes; but rather with the careful preparation of reasoned campaigns let us overwhelm their forces and annex Untala and its lands to the territories of our King. Let us implore the help of the Gods and summon the forces of the realm, and march with ordered brigades against the enemies of our race and religion."

"Mansingji's counsel is always cautious," burst forth the sneering tones of the Chondawat leader. "Such was not the former usage of Rajput blood. A blow for a blow, and the sword ready to leap from its scabbard, that was the practice of our forefathers. Are we to sit still and marshal regiments and arrange a strategy, with our cheeks still hot from the stroke? Let Mansingji preach patience like a coward. I and my Chondawats at least will seek satisfaction for our name in instant action."

Then the King spoke from his throne, and his uplifted finger had in its gesture dignity and reproof.

"Neither Chondawat nor Saktawat will do anything except what his King commands. That, Naharsingji, that, Mansingji, is the first of Rajput usages, the holiest of our practices. And I say, I the King, that the words of Mansingji are right, and that not a mere slaking of revenge in momentary

slaughter, but the permanent triumph of secure conquest, shall be our answer to the challenge. So, my nobles, call your forces, summon all your armaments, and a week hence let us meet in the temple, fix our march, and ask the blessing of the Gods. Hear my words well, Naharsingji, and obey."

Naharsingji, still hot to answer, met the king's stern eye and was abashed. He bowed slowly, half reluctantly, and withdrew in silence to his proper place. In the hall clamant rage gave way to a quiet murmur of contained purpose, and the fierce warrior lines fell again into order and array. The King rose slowly from his seat and surveyed his subjects with an imperious glance. Then, preceded by his servitors, he marched with stately step down the central aisle, acknowledging with his right hand the farewell salutations of his nobles. At the door he mounted the horse which stood waiting in caparisons of gold brocade, and rode slowly down the causeway to the shores of the lake and towards his palace. Before and beside him were torch-bearers and behind him followed the horsemen of his bodyguard. And the towns-people, hushed by the omens of impending struggle, dispersed quietly to their homes.

As the nobles pressed quickly to the door,

Naharsingji and Mansingji, leaders of the rival septs, were carried against each other by the throng.

"The King has spoken and he has chosen your counsel, Mansingji," said the former. "So be it: the King's orders are his orders. But I at least hold your counsel that of one who is no man. And its acceptance adds but one more to the griefs I have against you. Beware, Mansingji, for I shall not wait upon revenge."

"Revenge yourself by surpassing me in the field, rash boy," said Mansingji. "I will not take up your challenge now when an enemy awaits us. But, if we both return, then will I teach you that a Saktawat chief is not to be so treated."

At these words Naharsingji, half beside himself, strove to reach his sword and escape from the hands of the friends who had gathered round him. Mansingji stood still with arms folded upon his breast and laughed scornfully. As he struggled, Naharsingji felt the hand of his cousin, Prithviraj, upon his arm.

"This is madness," he exclaimed, "in the royal palace! Is this a place for fighting? For us to struggle here would be a sacrilege. Let us show ourselves better in the field, as we shall, but not brawl like peasants in the prince's precinct."

Raging, Naharsingji was forced away by his angry adherents. Weak with wrath and despair, he was brought to his mansion in the town and flung himself on the divans of his hall.

"Send quickly to all our estates," he cried to Prithviraj, who stood beside him. "Let the war-drums be rolled and our men assembled. We must gather a force which shall shame the proud Saktawats and give the name of Naharsingji place over all his rivals. Oh! that I could have torn the throat of Mansingji as he stood there, laughing insolently. That I should have to bear this and endure the pacific counsels of a dotard!"

Orders were quickly given and troopers sent galloping over the country to call the Chondawat men-at-arms. As he saw them ride off, one after the other, spurred and loose-reined, from the open gateway, he gradually became less fretful, more at ease.

"We shall outdo those others, never fear," he said, clapping his cousin's shoulder. "The Chondawats shall be first as ever, and our revenge, if late, shall be the deeper. Now let us to bed and dream of victory."

"I for one shall dream of the dancing-girl," answered Prithviraj. "Did you mark her? By Narayan, she was superb, as she stood there, facing

us all, knowing that she faced death, and yet hurled out insult upon insult. God! what a woman!"

But Naharsingji thrust him out angrily.

"An impudent strumpet!" he said, and told him to keep his praise for others' hearing.

Meanwhile the dancing-girl was awaited with impatience at Untala. The Arab watchmen at the gate had orders to scan the horizon for her coming and to bear the first news straight to the Mussulman commander. Sentries were doubled and the walls well manned against the chances of sudden attack. The cannon were mounted and their primings looked to, and ammunition of stone balls as well as leaden piled beside each gun. On the second evening she arrived, and the Rajput escort took leave within sight of the fort. She gave their officer a flower from her hair, and waved her hand as she crossed the drawbridge let down for her reception. The guards gathered round her, praising her mettle and her beauty, while the maid-servants stood upon the balcony to see her cross the courtyard.

The Commander, Muzaffar Khan, rose to meet her and took her by the hand, and pressed her to a seat beside him on the cushions.

"Heart's Ease," he asked, "what did you say,

and what said they ? Are they coming to give us a chance of battle ? Why did their armies not march out at once ? Will they still skulk in their mountain fastnesses and avoid the alternative offered by the True God, conversion or death at the believers' swords ? "

Then Dilaram, the dancing-girl—"Heart's Ease" —laughed and threw her arms about his neck.

" First the reward," she said, " my soul. I did your work. Now give me of your love."

She seemed a different woman now, her eyes darting fire, gaiety in all her limbs, soft, tender, and caressing. At one moment she would break into song, then give a kiss, then dance some steps before her lover, then slowly bending lay her hands upon his shoulders, her face close to his till he saw his features mirrored upon her eyes, then quickly break away as he tried to catch her. At last she seized a plate of fruit from a little table and threw the oranges in the air and caught them and threw them again to the corners of the room. Then, breaking the plate in two, she used the pieces as castanets while she danced merrily to and fro.

" Madcap," he cried at last, " little Satan, come here and let me kiss you."

As she only shook her head derisively, he jumped up and chased her round the room, while

she danced and cast side-long glances of mockery at him. At last he seized her panting and lifted her in his arms and carried her struggling and kicking to their seat.

Later she told him every detail of her adventures, her reception, the anger of the nobles, the good grace of the king, her journeyings and her defiance. Only of the young nobleman who had sought her in the crowd and had gazed upon her in the pavilion she forgot to speak. Muzaffar Khan was proud of her and swore to love her for ever, and called her his little devil and his angel of death and the soul of his soul. And he caressed her and rubbed his cheek against hers, and showered on her the treasure he had promised, and bestowed besides a necklace of pearls from a secret casket in his keeping.

Then he called a council of officers and told them the news.

"In three or four days the Hindus will come," he said, "and we must have all ready for their reception. Let them once come before our walls and we can smash their forces so that the pieces shall never again cohere. Those of us that die shall be taken to Paradise. And the blood of unbelievers is an atonement for sin and an acceptable offering to the Most High. But they

fight well enough, these Rajputs, and are worthy foemen. Verily the name of Muzaffar Khan shall be uplifted. For each one of us glory or Paradise is waiting. Shall not we, Afghans from the northern mountains, men of a fresher air and a cleaner water, have victory from infidels that give partnership to God and eat of forbidden foods? Go and see, each one of you, that your men are ready and your arms well ordered. For a day is coming to all of us on which we shall win renown, and our names shall be written in gold by the pen of the royal scribes."

So day after day the sentries on Untala looked for the coming of the Rajput army, and there was drilling and the giving of orders and the passing of countersigns. And the people were shut within the city walls, and those that were unfaithful or suspect were driven forth, and even the fetching of water and the cooking of meat was under martial rule. The soldiers made ready their armour and polished their swords and matchlocks; and at night round their camp-fires were jests and rejoicings. In the upper rooms of the palace, Dilaram was glad; for at last she had fresh interests, and the breath of contained excitement and the expectation of slaughter lashed her jaded nerves to a tingle as the bather is refreshed by the

lash of the salt surf of the ocean. She received Muzaffar Khan each evening with a freshness of endearment, and showered upon him the renewed warmth of her emotions. He took comfort in her pleasure; and found an indolent pride in the contemplation of a coming victory, which in reliance upon destined merit he accepted as his due and the right of his race and faith. "The fast-days are gone aside and the feast-days are come," he had quoted from Hafiz, one night as he lay with his head on her lap and looked up into her dancing eyes, while they listened to the calls of sentries and the sharp beating of the drum, as the captain of the guards went his rounds.

"It is life at last," she said, as she bent over him and tickled his face with a jasmin bud. "Is death too great a price for such life as this?"

CHAPTER V.

FOR a week there was preparation throughout the country that still acknowledged the sway of the Rajput prince. To the fortified villages that were built in the middle of lands that looked like parks the messengers came with the news of war. Here millet crops waved their heads at each touch of wind. The lanes were fenced with hedges of cactus and of euphorbia with its glutinous white juice. Near the wells, where straining bullocks raised leathern bags of water by the aid of pulleys, grew crops of wheat and barley and little irrigated patches of red pepper. Starlings sheltered from the noonday heat in the broad tops of mango trees, and feathery acacias shaded the field paths. There were other tracts where the sandy plains stretched brown on all sides and the village houses were built of mud, and drinking-water had to be sought a hundred feet below the level of the unfruitful earth. When the sun was high, the hot air trembled in little waves over the sand, and mirages in the distance mocked and misled the weary traveller. Jackals panted in the hollows

between the dunes, and the sand-grouse flew straight and fast to the pools in the drying streams. But the men were wild and strong and enduring, and they furbished their swords at the summons. Other messengers sought unknown forest tracks to the hills, where lurked dark aboriginal tribes. When they reached the solitary homesteads of the Bhils, the headman would give them whey and unleavened bread of maize and kill a fowl for their welcome. Slowly the women and children, who at their first view had fled to the trackless woods, returned and grew easy and chattered. Then when he heard the message, the headman beat on the great war-drum that lay in the yard behind his house. Its slow beat was heard over miles, and the Bhils, in their separate farmsteads, and those that were hunting the mountain pig and the jungle peacock, turned from their business and seized bows and arrows and flocked to the trysting. At night they lit bonfires on the peaks or set fire to a whole hillside, washing the mountain, as they called it, in a bath of flame, as a signal to stragglers and an offering to the devil-spirits that hide in the gnarled roots of trees and thirst for the blood of men.

From all parts of the land men foregathered at the capital to serve in their sovran's armies.

Evening after evening, the drum and conches of the temples were attuned to the service of war, and their notes were fraught with a murderous meaning to the listeners. The great god, Shiva, they thought they heard, shouting with terrible joy at the prospect of adding fresh skulls to that garland of grinning death's-heads which hangs from his fatal neck; and the maiden ascetics, his heavenly attendants, seemed to shake their attenuated limbs in the cruel glee of anticipation.

On the seventh day, in the cold grey hour before dawn, the Chief rose up from his bed. Through the whole night the household astrologer had watched the stars from the palace roof, and from the consideration of the constellations had delineated the portents of the fates.

"What of the hour?" said the Chief, as the Brahman entered the room at his call.

"Lord and Master," he answered, "I have waited your rising with the horoscope of events. The star of war is propitious and the constellations have influenced benignly on the flow of circumstance. The conjunction is favourable, and victory waits upon your advance."

"Have you marked the hour?" again said the Prince. "When shall the conch-shells be blown and the troops of the gods advance?"

The Brahman answered.

"By the old water-clock that stands in the highest chamber of the palace at the open balcony I have calculated the conjunctions and have marked the hour fated by the movements of the heavens for your advance. Even now measured water is dripping slowly in a copper urn in my apartments. When it reaches the brim, then is the moment for the march. Victory to Krishna, victory to the King!"

The Chief murmured a morning prayer of thanksgiving to the deities and dismissed the astrologer with many gifts.

Then he retired for his ablutions. Seated upon a square wooden stool in the ceremonial attitude, he addressed to sun and water the prayers of Brahman ritual and implored the lavation of sin. The priests of the household, stripped to their loin-cloths and with sacred threads upon their shoulders, chanted strophes in the hieratic language while they poured Ganges water from new copper vessels over the shoulders of their protector. Then they did obeisance to the household gods, the genii of the family, and the feminine spirit that keeps ward over each sept. Lamps were waved in circles before the idols of jewelled alabaster and offerings made of clarified butter

and of marigolds. On the brow of the Chief the priests drew the symbols of their god, and at the junction between the eyelids imprinted a circle of red ochre, the emblem of success and good fortune. He arose sanctified and anointed for the ordained labours of a Hindu king, the protector of the animal sacred to the gods, the protector of an hereditary priesthood and their immemorial scriptures.

"What of the will of the gods, mighty priests of the royal household?" he asked, as he rose refreshed and anointed.

"The gods are propitious," answered the oldest of the priests, he who for fifty years had daily done the service of the household deities. "They accept of our offerings and their favour is poured forth freely from on high. They are wroth with those that are impious and those that are oppressive, and their blessing is upon your shadow and the tread of your feet has been sanctified."

"The gods are merciful," answered the Chief, "and I seek strength only in their favour."

Robed in the panoply of state he now rode out with a royal escort to the plateau above the hill, which was the precinct of martial display. Where the road rises to the plateau, on the shoulder of the slope, stands the temple of the god Ganesh,

the god of initiations and beginnings. Before the shrine had been erected a temporary triumphal arch, with embroidered cloths cut into curious fringes hanging from wooden pilasters. Up to the arch rode the chief, and, placing his left hand upon one column, leapt lightly to the ground. The priests met him and accompanied him to the inner fane, where he performed the ceremony of prostration on eight portions of the body, touching feet and knees and hands and chest and head to the earth before the deity. Then with joined hands raised to forehead he besought the benediction of the god whose image rested before him in a recess upon the carven platform of stone. The idol had in it something monstrous, incomprehensible. The head was the head of an elephant and the trunk curled in repose over the fat paunch. The hands were four, and in each was a symbol of the various vocations of the deity. In one was the *discus*, heavy, sharp-edged, and rotatory, which is also the weapon of the major godhead Vishnu, and which, if flung with force by a trained hand, can at a touch decapitate man or beast. In another he held a lotus, symbol of peace and contemplation. The third maintained a club, horrific and tremendous. The fourth held the conch-shell, by whose blasts are announced the

beginnings of campaigns. The image in its dark fane could be seen dimly, scarlet with ochre and greasy from innumerable unctions. Before the stone, which was to him a symbol of ancestral traditions, the Chief prostrated himself; and at the conclusion of his prayer he performed the prescribed circumambulations round the shrine.

"Art thou pleased with thy servant, Lord Ganesh?" he asked humbly, when the ceremony was completed.

And the priests answered.

"Blessed is the initiation of your task, king of the warrior race. Holy is the way that you tread, and the benediction of the gods has made smooth before your feet the place that is slippery and the path that is rough."

Outside of the temple the forces stood waiting in the order of review. On one side of the plain were the troops of the Chondawats; and at the head of their column, on a black horse, sat Prithviraj, the cousin and lieutenant of their leader, with a sprig of the *apta* tree in his turban. Behind him, line upon line, were the horsemen of the clan, mounted upon light, quick horses of the country. Rather small was their bone, but clean and strong. Their heads were small, like those of the horses of the Parthenon, and

their tiny ears curved in at the tufted points, as is the birth-mark of the Scythian horse domiciled in Kathiawad and the sandy plains that stretch northward to Mewar. They were bitted with sharp thorn-bits, and the pull of standing martingales had arched their necks to a fuller curve. The saddles were of quilted cloths, and the stirrups broad and heavy. The men wore round helmets of steel, steel-spiked, with a brush of horse-hair fixed in the porte-aigrette. From the sides and back of the helmet hung a net of mail, a covering for the neck. Some had quivers and bow-cases slung across their backs, like the Moghul horsemen when they rode plundering into Persia and across the Indian passes. All were armed with curved scimitars, the scabbards studded with precious stones, turquoise and amethyst, carbuncle and cornelian, or covered with velvets and bound with chased brass. Their shields were round and of steel, inset in *niello* or with diaper of flower patterns, and incised into figures of animals and the chase. Others had shields of the blue bull's hide, lacquered in green and scarlet, with borders of geometrical figures or arabesques. Many carried lances, with which they were wont to tilt at the ring and to spear the wild boar in the hunt. Rajputs of the blood were all

these, cavaliers, equal by descent to the monarch, owing him rather homage to rank and authority than subordination.

Behind these were the infantry, drawn largely from the poorer Rajputs, exiles in many cases enrolled in the protection of a stronger leader, or refugees from broken clans, some holders of allodial lands, a yeomanry called out for especial duties, not daily owing service like the holders of military fiefs. Among them, too, were many of the cultivating castes, attracted by the chance of adventure or the hopes of ambition. Men of all castes were there, easily distinguished by their dress and manner and their practice of arms. Many of them carried matchlocks, the stock often inlaid with mother-of-pearl in beautiful patterns. The barrels were bound with brass wire to the stock, and the butts were carved and cut in fantastic shapes. A few of the richer had flint firelocks in the fashion of the Portuguese. The captains of a hundred and the captains of fifty carried gauntlet swords with broad blades for cut and thrust; while others of the officers had double-edged swords with a double grip, like the sacred sword of the God of War. Some were armed with javelins and some bore clubs and pikes. Some wore little but cotton jackets and kilted cotton

cloths hanging from waist to knee; others were protected against blows by coats of quilted silk studded with brass nails and stiffened with copper wire. Some had fastened cuirasses of fine plates of damascened steel over steel-ring shirts.

Behind these again lounged the unevenly-dressed lines of archers, Bhils from the distant hills. These, too, were gathered by septs, each distinguished by a separate totem goddess, but assimilated by tradition to the Rajput clans; and the proud names of Jadhav and Rathor and Chohan had been transferred from royal dynasties to the primitive divisions of an aboriginal race. Their bows reached to their shoulders, and the bow was of bamboo and the string a narrow strip of split cane. Their arrows were feathered with plumes from the birds they had shot, and their quivers were of rough tanned leather, hard like wood. On their wrists they wore bracelets of brass, and their faces were tattooed with green dyes expressed from the forest plants. Their unshorn curls hung wildly over neck and shoulder, beneath a twisted rag, and they were naked except for the slight loin-cloth held up by a string. Squat and broad, with rude movements and fierce moments of passionate suspicion, they had both the laughter and the ferocity of children. Some

were followed by their dogs, savage creatures that growled and fought; and they stood apart, despising and despised, like an obtrusion of primeval savagery.

"You have done your duty well," said the Chief to Naharsingji as he passed their lines in review.

"The Chondawats will never fail their king," was the quiet answer.

Opposite were the forces of the Saktawats, as numerous and as martial. The wing feather of the heron was the emblem which they bore in cloth turban or steel helmet. Some carried heavy maces with six striking edges hanging from saddle-bow. In their waist-belts of many folds were stuffed daggers with double grips and broad blades, curved elliptically to the point, and narrow knives with twisted blades, and daggers that opened at a grip to a triple blade, and Arab *javais* with double edge. Others carried axes with heads made of a bent blade, and on the top two points of steel, shaped like the horns of the black antelope. Others had crow-bills like pick-axes, and a blow would send the point crashing down through the brain-pan of an opponent. There were caparisons of cloth-of-gold and armour of fine *bidri* work, and weapons inlaid with gold;

and next to the gallant horseman might be a naked savage, unkempt and dusty, with only a bow and a few arrows for his armoury.

The Chief passed slowly down the lines, escorted by the officers of the household. The men drew themselves up as he passed and each did him honour in their several ways, and the shrill trilling war-cry of the Bhils mingled with the deeper acclamations of the Rajputs. The pride of power and the battle-thirst was on him when he returned from his inspection to the centre of the plain. He had raised his hand to call his pages and give the signal for advance, when the Chondawat Chief galloped across the open space to the royal standard. As he reined up his horse on his haunches before the King, the Saktawat leader set spur to his horse for the same goal.

"Great King," said Naharsingji, "if you are satisfied with your Chondawats and the review has left you gracious to your servant, bid us now advance and lead the army to the Mussulman forts. We are ready, and my men only await your word."

But in the meantime Mansingji of the Saktawats had ridden up, and he cried to the King to stop.

"The vanguard for the Saktawats," he cried. "It is our right, lord of the land, and we are of the elder branch."

This was the claim which for two generations had been in dispute between the clans, and the hatred of the two nobles was bitterest for this precedence. The men guessed their leaders' purpose from their gestures and cast menacing glances at each others' lines across the plain.

"We have won our right by the sword," answered Naharsingji, angrily, "and we keep it. Have we ever failed in battle? Are not my men always to the front? I am the younger, Mansingji the more wary. Let him keep the main body with his strategy. But I claim the van, and my men demand it as their right."

Mansingji respectfully, but with no less passion, urged ancient precedents and the needs of present times. He would not answer for his men if their honour were affronted. He raised his right hand in imprecation towards the heavens and pressed his claims with eloquence and ferocity. Naharsingji, listening, spurred his horse in anger and smote fist upon thigh. The Chief listened anxiously, for he knew the dangers of such rivalries and feared defection and dispute in the face of a powerful enemy. Rajput quarrels had unhappily too often led to lost battles.

At last he spoke.

"The dispute is old and its settlement involved.

This is no time for adjudication, and a general's tents are no court of law. Both deserve the vanguard, and to neither would I now gainsay the claim, even were this the season and here the proof. But this is my order, and let it prove a final judgement. You shall both start equal in parallel lines of march with your men formed in wedges and the leaders at each apex abreast of each other. Then you shall race from the last encampment at cockcrow to the walls of Untala; and to him who first enters the walls, be he Chondawat or Saktawat, to him and to all his clan and to their heirs for all time, shall be vested and entailed the leadership of the Rajput van. Have I said well, my nobles, and is this a true judgement?"

"It is justice," both answered with one breath, and rode off to tell their followers of the royal decision.

At once there was bustle and uproar. All acclaimed the judgement and made haste to deserve the prize. The light cavalry wheeled quickly to its place; the heavier horsemen in their mail and corslets trotted behind them; guns were pulled to their places; and the infantry formed in line ready for the march. Priests made prayer to the upraised sword, sacred to Kartikeya,

God of War, and to the holy tree on which the hero Arjun had hung his arms when he went to exile. Men shouted bravadoes and extolled the water of their swords. Others tested their spears or pulled the strings of their bows taut to their ears and listened joyfully to the hollow twang when they let go their fingers. The Chief raised his hand, and the trumpeters lifted the conch-shells to their lips and blew the harsh blast that denoted war. The drummers of the cavalry caught up the sound and beat heavily on their kettle-drums. The men raised loud cries of " Har ! Har ! Mahadev ! " and the Rajput call of " Már ! Már ! " echoed over the field. Elephants were goaded and reins pressed tight to horses' necks ; and the army was on the march—Untala its objective, revenge its hope.

CHAPTER VI

THE fortress of Untala rose square from a plain, four miles from the last low spurs of the mountains. Its thick walls were some thirty feet high and about a quarter of a mile long on each side. The principal gateway faced the south-west, halfway in the wall of that side. At each corner was a round tower, mounted with cannon, and there were two rectangular bastions on each side commanding the gateways. All round the wall were battlements, sheltering a broad road round the top, along which troops could be quickly moved from one bastion to relieve another side. The fortress was as much town as garrison, and the space between the walls was crowded with narrow streets and winding lanes. Here were bankers and goldsmiths and workers in brass and workers in textiles. In another quarter were the houses of cultivators, and courtyards in which cows and buffaloes ruminated their millet-stalks and lowed softly to their calves. In the centre, on a slight eminence, stood the palace of the

Commander, a massive structure of grey stone, beside which the minarets of the mosque raised their turrets.

At the bottom of the walls, from the north to the extreme corner, and again turning to south and west, ran a little stream, which lost itself in morasses between the south-east town and the main gate. Here the cattle were watered and the degraded, untouchable castes had dug little holes from which they scooped muddy water for their own drinking. The huts of these outcastes, wretched hovels of mud and straw, with filthy midden heaps, in the midst of rubbish, lay round the walls as if imploring a protection that they dared not claim.

On the fourth of the waxing moon, the Rajput army in the evening marched through the mountain passes and pitched their tents three miles from the fort, between the slopes of the hills and the little river. There they washed off the dust of the march and forgot fatigue in a night of revelry. As the night drew to its close, they rubbed their bodies with yellow paste of turmeric and marked their brows with red ochre, and swallowed each his pellet of opium to inspire them with new vigour. Then the rival clans drew into battle array, each in the form of a wedge, as the

Chief had commanded, their leader at the head, and awaited the crowing of the cocks.

At the same hour within the fort, Muzaffar Khan, the commander, rose with a last caress from the couch of the dancing-girl, his mistress, and after due accomplishment of ablution, prostrated himself in the mosque to God the One and Greatest, and besought from Him alone the benediction of the morning. Behind the leader of prayer he bowed himself and knelt and touched his forehead in humility on the ground.

While he still prayed, a sentinel entered the mosque and stood beside the Commander and saluted. Muzaffar Khan guessed his purpose, but motioned him away, and went through his prayer leisurely to the end. Then he arose, and, going to the door, put on his slippers and beckoned the soldier to draw near.

"What is it?" he asked the man. "May it be the wish of God that the infidels have dared to approach our threshold!"

The man told him all that was known of the enemy and their dispositions.

"They have been seen in camp, three miles from here," he ended, "and they are now striking their tents and drawing into line".

"Shukr-i-Khoda! Thanks be to God!" was

the reply. "Have the captains been told? Go round the walls quickly, tell them all to be ready, and call the officers to meet me at the southern door. Go quickly, call them."

The man saluted, turned on his heel, and went away. The Commander walked quickly to the post which he had chosen for his own and awaited his officers at the tower which fronted the direct onset of the enemy. As he looked over the battlements, he could see the outcastes below running wildly from their huts to escape being crushed between the hostile forces, and could hear the voices of frightened women calling to lost children and the cries of infants waking from slumber to find themselves being carried off anyhow and anywhere by their parents. The poor wretches looked back with regret to the dirty huts which would soon be fired by the fighting soldiers, and the few sticks and rags—their only possessions—which they were never again to see. Some determined to wait at the fringe of battle and to recoup themselves at nightfall from the plunder of the dead and wounded. Those secreted the sharp knives which they used for skinning cattle, and smiled, as they passed their thumbs over the edge, to think of the wounded whose throats they would cut, before another

dawning, while they plucked rings and bracelets from stiffening arms and fingers.

The sky now began to turn slowly to grey and the Rajput lines could be seen breaking into movement. The advance guards of cavalry first dashed ahead, and reconnoitred the advance, and then, under the supervision of the leaders, the cannon were hauled and dragged along, while on the flanks marched the elephants, each carrying a tower in which sat three men-at-arms with loaded arquebuses. Each clan eyed its rivals as they strained and pulled at the ropes, and swore at each other, and begged for yet another effort and for one more pull. The captains waved their swords and the cavalry raced in front and then circled back and then passed again, cheering the artillery to their task, and themselves leaping off their horses occasionally to assist. Naharsingji sat as though on springs, all fire and impatience, on a bounding, foam-spattered stallion. He called to the soldiers to die rather than be beaten in the race, and he seemed to see every man at once. One he would praise, while almost at the same instant he hit another with the flat of his sword, and reproached his mother for his laziness

"Har! Har! the vanguard to the Chonda wats!" he cried, and his voice could be heard

throughout the lines: "Death rather than defeat. Again, again! one more effort, and we win. Har! Har! Mahadev." The men tried to cheer in spite of panting breath and bursting sides, and pulled and tugged again till they were a hundred yards in front of the Saktawats.

Mansingji was not behindhand in guiding his clan. But he shaded his eyes with his hand and tried in the dim light to scrutinize each inequality of ground and to find the easiest tracks for his troops. He rode constantly to the front and picked each foot of the way, and sent orderlies galloping back to the gunners and the elephants to warn them where to deploy and how to make the best of the lie of the ground. When he saw the Chondawats forge ahead, he rode back and urged his men to remember their name and to die rather than be beaten. He turned them half to the left, and led them round the morasses which he guessed by the fresher green of the grass; and only when he felt the ground again firm to the tread did he deflect the line towards the main gate of the city.

As he did so the Chondawats found themselves in difficulties. Blindly pulling and straining, elated at gaining a few yards in the race and thinking only of their rivals, they had tripped

without warning into the morasses of the little river. Horses plunged, and one fell and kicked his rider on the skull till he died, and another broke its own leg and had to be left struggling and in pain. More men came quickly to help the guns through the mud, but the wheels had to be pushed and lifted, and the toil was overwhelming. Cuirasses and armour were discarded and trodden underfoot in the mess, swords were lost, and primings wetted, while not a few fell out and lay with heaving chests and sides on the grass tufts, trodden upon by others rushing to help, and at last by the advancing elephants. By the time they got through, the dressing of the line was broken, the men tired and dead-beat, and some fifty had been lost without a blow. Before they emerged from the morass, Mansingji of the Saktawats had already got his batteries into line and linked gun to gun by a series of iron chains. As Naharsingji looked, the Saktawat guns opened fire and the elephants were driven against the gate.

The first lap of the race had been won by Mansingji.

"Go on, get the guns into line as quickly as you can, without troubling to bring them nearer," cried Naharsingji to the commander of the battery.

"I cannot wait here now, for I must at any cost

get to the walls. Try to cover us as much as you can, but we must get in as we best may. Whatever happens, I shall not let myself be beaten by that son of an accursed father, Mansingji."

So saying Naharsingji called his squadrons of light horse and charged madly towards the tower, on which stood the Commander and his staff. As he rode, he was met by a storm of rockets fired low into his lines, and by showers of arrows from the defenders. All the battlements on the two sides of the wall burst into smoke and flame as the cannon and swivel-guns were depressed and fired against the attacking forces. Men could be seen rushing along the walls to reinforce the round tower and the bastions over the main-gate. A tremendous cry arose, and men joined without thought and meaning in one phrase, one word, one intonation. "The Faith! The Faith!" they shouted from the walls, and shrieks to slay and imprecations to the gods swayed from the struggling lines of onset. Men from Lucknow could be seen leaning over the wall, cautiously putting over their heads, to select a struggling group on which they could drop their hand-grenades. Great balls of blazing naphtha were hurled at the plunging cavalry and the stallions squealed and bit in anger and pain. Naharsingji seized a

matchlock and aimed at an opening in the wall above him. The head and shoulders of a man with outstretched arms hung limply over the edge for a minute, blood gushing from the shattered brow, and then slid slowly forward and down, till the body fell with a thud beside Naharsingji, as a wild-duck drops suddenly to the marksman. The Bhils had run forward, taking cover as they came behind every tussock, and were now dropping their arrows over the walls in the hope of hitting those who were concealed behind. Fire was concentrated against the tower in an attempt to drive away the defenders and give time for an escalade.

Mansingji had brought up his elephants against the gateway and had taken his seat on the foremost. On the forehead and over the small vulnerable hollows above the elephant's eyes were plates of massive steel, and the driver sitting upon his neck with uplifted ankus was clothed in mail and wore a steel skull-cap under his turban. The top of the animal's trunk and the space under the eyes and the flapping ears were painted with grotesque arabesques in bright colours, and the movements of its feet set a hundred bells jangling. He was staunch, the elephant, and stood firm against all the fire of rockets and flaming balls. When he felt a corpse in his way, he seized the

body between his fore-feet and passed it to his hind-legs, and kicked it backwards with a sudden jerk. They tried now to drive him against the gate that he should burst it open with his head and the enormous propulsion of his body. But the gate was studded closely with sharp spikes, and the elephant could not face their threatening points. He retreated a few paces and the Afghan soldiery flung obscene abuse at its useless bulk. They trained their guns higher and fired over its head at the infantry behind.

But the practice made by the attackers' arrows and matchlocks had been good, and many of the defenders had fallen and lay groaning on the wall or in the narrow lanes into which they had fallen. The stone path on the wall was slippery with blood, and an officer running gaily to the next loophole slipped in the mess and fell down inside, spiking himself on a great iron hook fastened in the wall. There he hung with the hook through his bowels, shrieking with agony, while the others, fighting, had no time for his relief. At the tower where the Commander stood the losses had been heavy, and corpses and wounded men had lain thick, suffocating under each other's weight, with their neighbours' blood running into their mouths. Twice Muzaffar Khan had had the space

cleared of its dead, and had the dying carried down the steps to be placed in shelter in a neighbouring cattle-shed.

Naharsingji, in the moment's respite while they cleared the tower and sent for further reinforcements, had managed to get two scaling-ladders set upright. Close up to the wall, under the shelter of its horizontal bands of masonry and the bracketed platforms of the tower, stood the keenest of his marksmen, seeking at once to avoid the missiles and molten lead of the defenders and to pick off any obtruding head. When the "Mad Chief" had got half-way up the ladder, a scout called out to Mansingji and warned him that the Chondawats would be first.

Mansingji, when he heard, touched his elephant-driver on the shoulder and gave him instructions. The man was reluctant and tried to refuse. But Mansingji held a dagger to him and made him swear obedience upon the blade. Then he slipped off the elephant, helping himself down by its tail, like a sailor by a rope.

"Naharsingji is young," he said, "and forgets the duties of a leader. Let me die, if by the planning of a soldier I can gain our rights for our people, and show the right deserved, not by mere courage, but by skill."

So saying, before his astonished captains, he sprang lightly on the elephant's tusks, and putting one foot on each tusk, laid his hands in a firm grasp on the ears where they joined the forehead. Like one crucified he stood there and turned his head to see the gate. "Drive on," he cried, "now he will no longer fear the spikes." Then he laid his head on the elephant's brow and spoke soothing words of honour and trust to the great beast. And the animal seemed to understand, and raised his trunk and curled it against his master, and drove steadily against the door. The spikes pierced the body of Mansingji, and the elephant put forth his strength without fear. Slowly the door began to creak and rend and then burst open. And those over the gateway were amazed and forgot to fire. Behind him the infantry of the Saktawats crowded up with drawn swords, breathless and expectant, waiting to rush in through the opening door and to honour their chief with dreadful revenge. In the meantime, Naharsingji had been once cast down from the ladder. He was bleeding from a wound at his thigh, and his white breeches were a stain of black and red. His forehead was cut open and the bone exposed; and the left hand hung limply at the wrist. But the pain had not made itself felt except as a fresh

excitement, and the " Mad Chief " got the ladder propped up again and began to climb with dagger ready at his waistbelt. As he was three-quarters up, he saw Mansingji's body hanging from the elephant's ears and could hear the rending of the door. While he looked, the defenders leaned over the wall and fired at him and his men and strained their muscles to upset the ladders.

" The Saktawats will have the lead if we are not quick," he said, turning to his cousin Prithviraj, who was behind him. " Keep close behind me and push me over their heads into the city. Thus only shall we be the first."

As he spoke a bullet pierced his chest and he all but let go his hold. His cousin, clambering up, put his arm round his waist and relieved the pressure on the relaxing fingers.

"Naharsingji is the first," Prithviraj cried, and swung his leader's body by shoulder and waist-belt clear over the wall and over the soldiers on to the pavement beyond. " The Chondawats lead for ever," he laughed, and climbed up the rungs and sprang on the walls followed by his shouting men. As they jumped they could see the main gate open, and the leading lines of the Saktawats rushing into the city with waving swords.

Once in the city, the Rajputs were irresistible

and drove the Mussulmans before them through the streets, thrusting and cutting and killing as they went. Morale had gone and the gallantry of the two leaders had stupefied the Mussulmans, while it invigorated their opponents. In another hour the last of the fighting men in the garrison had been killed or captured. Muzaffar Khan defended himself bravely to the last, retreating step by step slowly through the streets, face to the foe, ever and again dashing out upon the Rajputs and slaying some, and then back again to his own men. His sword swung round his shoulder from side to side like a constant flash of light from red embers. He died at last at the door of his own palace, shouting the creed of the Faith with his last breath.

When he had seen the death of the Mussulman commander, Prithviraj made his way back to the tower, where the body of the Chondawat leader still lay as it had fallen. As he passed through the streets, he could see the Mussulman soldiers lying in heaps where they had been slain. A few still groaned and tore at their throats with the unthinking clutch of pain. The few who had surrendered had been given quarter, and were being led away, fastened with ropes, as captives, dragging their tired limbs wearily, despondent. On the tower he

found the body of Naharsingji, bleeding and half-mangled, as he had seen it fall when he threw it. He lifted the head in sorrow to his knee, and found it warm and the muscles not yet rigid. Surprised, he looked more closely and felt a slight pulse at the wrist. Quickly getting up, he went to the edge of the battlement and shouted till he attracted the notice of some stragglers. Then carefully they lifted the breathing body down the steps and carried their leader to the house of a Brahman doctor, a man skilled in the leechcraft of the Sanskrit scriptures. In the neat shady house they laid him on a bed and the women of the household fetched water and the Brahman murmured incantations and examined the wounds with gentle fingers. After anxious visitation, he turned and told them there was hope their chief would survive and again lead the vanguard which he had won for the Chondawats.

The body of Mansingji was meantime carried by his men with lamentation and the praise of minstrels to the encampment of his sovran, and the royal command was promulgated for his burning in the ceremonial pyre with all the pomp of royalty, at the sunset.

CHAPTER VII

WITH the death of the Muslim commander began the plundering of the city by the victors. Men went off in groups, drunken with excitement, waving their bloody swords, yelling unmeaning sounds, some making indecent gestures, others singing songs or rushing down the street with locked arms. Where they went, they found shops and houses shut and barred. At first they amused themselves with rapping at the doors, and would shriek with laughter when they heard women scuttle away inside. One group came to a stable where buffaloes were tied up, and flung javelins at the frightened starting beasts. When the cattle became unmanageable, they cut off their heads with their swords and kicked them into the street; and two men staggered down the lane singing, each holding one horn of a dripping head. Bhil archers broke open a banker's house and tied him up by his thumbs and set burning matches to his toes, till he told them where he had hidden his treasure. Then they burst open his chests and sat on the

floor with vacant laughter, letting gold coins and precious gems slide through their fingers, liking the cold hard touch as they glided over the skin. Some Kolis stormed a Brahman's house and caught the women with rough bloody fingers and dragged them brutally into corners, and found their shrieks an amusing accompaniment to their lust. Here some Rajputs killed a squealing pig and scattered its blood over the decorated pulpit and marble floor of the mosque. Then some camp-followers in mere wantonness set a torch to a hut and cried with joy as the flames caught hold of the thatch and blew to the next house, while the inmates ran out in terror between the fire and the spearmen.

But when they saw the smoke and heard the shrieks of women rising from the sacked town, the Rajput officers and gentry steadied their joy and sobered themselves to their duties. They went through the town and drove those that were most frenzied outside of the walls, and made others march to the square near the palace. They reminded them that the people they were robbing were also Hindus and that a Rajput force had a chosen task of honour. Gradually they began to control their men and a respite was given to the townspeople. A line of water-carriers was

arranged and gangs were impressed to fetch grain for the men and grass for the horses.

After seeing Naharsingji properly cared for, and leaving two pages for his attendance, his cousin Prithviraj rushed back though the polluted mosque where some soldiers lay, grimy and half naked, beside a barrel of molasses liquor, to the palace of the Muslim commander. The guard-rooms at the gate were already occupied by his own men. Others strolled, with mechanical movements of exhaustion, through the courtyard and fingered the carven pilasters, as if trying, by the touch of man-made things, to recall their real being to its usual relation with outer objects. When they found a grove of lime-trees, they growled with animal pleasure, and began tearing off the sour yellow fruits and thrusting them into their dry mouths. A few lay by a concrete runnel of clear water and let it trickle over their sweaty hair and into their open mouths.

Prithviraj walked through an open door up the steep wooden stairs to the first floor. He passed through an ante-room where a bodyguard had used to sit. In a corner lay a water-pipe with the charcoal in the tulip-like bowl turned to grey ashes. From pegs hung scarves of bright colours and a lute lay on the floor. Beyond was the hall

of audience, where the Commander had done his public business and received his officers in state and listened to petitions and received remonstrances. Persian rugs of fine silk were laid down its length, and in the centre, where servants had been wont to pass, was a carpet of white felt with the border patterned in arabesques of vegetable dyes. At the head of the room was a kneeling throne of fretted wood, made after the patterns of Syria. On the walls were framed examples of Arabic caligraphy, pricked out in colours and illuminated with painted flowers.

Passing on, Prithviraj came to the hall of private reception, where the Commander had received the chief officers of the garrison and the heads of departments in private consultation. Here were little tables of ebony inlaid with ivory open-cases of figured *papier-maché* on which were painted the adventures of Bahrám-gur and scenes from the Shah-Namah. Large brass trays beaten into many patterns in the bazars of Benares were arranged on the floor, and on one still lay the folded leaves of betel and slices of areca nut. Beyond was the door of carven sandalwood which barred the way to the private apartments. As he stood before it, Prithviraj could hear the sound of trumpets and kettle-drums in the courtyard. He

jumped to the marble casement of the window and looked out. At his feet unrolled the pageant of victory and the triumphal entry of the Rajput chief through the conquered city to the forsaken palace. Flags were unfurled to the wind, music accompanied his march, and a deputation of the richer Hindu citizens waited to receive him and conciliate their new lord with gifts. Muzaffar Khan's corpse had been hastily thrust into an empty guard-room. The Chief alighted in the courtyard and took his seat under a canopy of state. Around him stood his nobles and his soldiers in the tired pride of victory, forgetting fatigue and suffering in the happiness of accomplishment.

Prithviraj jumped down from the window and burst open the private door. On the cushions that lay against the wall like a softer bed of extravagant luxury lay a woman, prone and reflective, with her face pressed tight to her hands. As she heard the lock break she sat up; and Prithviraj found himself face to face with the woman he had been seeking, Dilaram—"Heart's Ease"—the dancing-girl. He looked round and slipped the chain over the hasp of the door behind him.

"I have found you then," he said, and went up

to her slowly. He stood over her, looking down into her face.

She pressed her clenched fists into the cushions as if to spring up, but he flung himself quickly beside her and caught her arms to her side with his hands.

"Come, come, my pretty one," he said, "you need not pretend to escape. I am not the first man you have known, nor, I suppose, shall I be the last. But I want you, and mean you to be my prize of victory."

He put his right hand under her chin and tried to pull her head to his shoulder. But she twisted herself away and lay pulling to get up, held back by his grip on her left arm.

"What is the use of struggling?" he said again. You will only hurt yourself and you will gain no good. You can scream as you like and no one will assist you. A soldier has a right to his fancies, and a harlot is made for outrage."

But the woman turned round fiercely and caught his neck with her right hand and tried to choke him. In his astonishment his grip loosened for a moment, and she wrenched herself free and stood facing him, panting but triumphant.

"You little know me," she said, "if you think me a harlot at every man's orders. I choose my

lovers as I like, and they are honoured whom I choose. I am no weak woman, bred to a home, to be numb with terror in the arms of the first drunken soldier whose breath she feels on her neck. Thanks be to God, I know men and I know myself. Go into the bazar and seize some usurer's trembling daughter, if you like, and slake your appetite in her violation. She will not know how to resist, poor thing. But Muzaffar Khan was a brave man and his name was enough to make you tremble. By God's will, I shall not betray his memory to an infidel."

She looked superb as she stood thus, defiant, mature in charms and in mind, with all the attraction of a woman who has used the power of beauty and has emancipated herself from domestic cares to a woman's fellowship with living forces.

"Tigress," said Prithviraj, and ran after her. "I like you the better for your pride. I marked you first when you defied the Court, quiet and beautiful in the midst of anger; and I swore that you were the woman for me. I saw you in the road and I sought you; in the palace I looked and I loved you, you and your courage; and I love you the more now for your temper and your defiance. You are the female force incarnate, and I am a follower of the goddess's power."

He tried again to seize her, but she still taunted him as an infidel, and likened him to a jackal snatching at a lion's food. The boy's face was flushed and his hands quivering with excitement.

"Come to me quickly," he cried, "you that bestow your favours as you like—priestess of love —come!"

As he spoke, he seized the string of her petticoat and tried to burst it.

"You need a lesson," she cried, and as she spoke flashed a dagger from her corslet to his collar-bone. The pain smote him sharply, making him faint and sicken. His fingers opened and he fell slowly on his knees and sank head foremost to the ground. She watched his face grow pale and the blood trickle out on the marble. With an effort he raised his head and gasped.

"I love you better than ever," he said, "you slayer of men. I shall soon be cured of the scratch and you shall pay for the blow with kisses."

She watched him a little longer and her mouth grew kinder. He smiled up at her through his faintness.

"I go now to mourn Muzaffar Khan," she said at last, "and I must have time. But you are at any rate a man, though you are not of my faith."

"I shall be well soon, little tigress," answered

Prithviraj. "Give me some hope and tell me the time. But fix it soon, for I cannot be long without seeing you. Let me be cured of my wound and you shall see me again at your threshold."

His voice was faint, but his eyes were straight and decided.

"If six months hence," she answered, "you are well and of the same mind, come to Ajmer, to the street that runs up the hill, and ask for Dilaram. But I make no promise. It must be yours to use me patiently. If not—beware the tigress's claws again! But I will see you, and that should be much to a wounded man. Now I go to see your Chief and gain proper burial for my lover."

As she went, she took a yellow rose from the table and threw it at him. It fell on his shoulder. When he lifted it, it was dappled with blood, but he pressed it to his face.

That evening, while the flames of Mansingji's funeral pyre rose red to the sky amidst all the display of honour and respect, Dilaram stood with a few old men at the grave of Muzaffar Khan, the dead commander, and repeated the prayers of the faith. In the courtyard of his palace, the Rajput chief promulgated an order of annexation, and decreed at the same time the honours of the vanguard to the Chondawats. On the balcony, on

a couch, lay Prithviraj, the Chondawat, listening to the recital of the fortunes of his clan, and rejoiced. Rajput courage and Rajput gallantry had won another victory; and the tribal bards had a new exploit to add to their metrical annals.

THE TWO BROTHERS

THE TWO BROTHERS

THE cottage was built of rough stones, heaped one upon the other as they could be made to fit, without shaping or cement. The roof was of turf, and the peat-smoke rose sharp to the nostrils from a hole left open in the thatch. Outside, on a rock out-cropping from the thin soil, to the right of the low half-broken gap which was the door, sat Duncan Macdonald, slowly drawing at his short pipe.

He sat there looking across and down the loch to the red sun slowly sinking behind heavy black clouds to the grey white-crested waves of the Atlantic. In the cottage behind him could be heard a woman's voice quietly moaning as one rent by inexorable pain, too great to be borne in silence, yet known without remedy, to be endured as best might be.

Duncan Macdonald shook his head restlessly as he listened to the moans, but settled again to his pipe with a gesture of impatient helplessness. As he looked out upon the firth and the sea, the

waves seemed a colder, dirtier grey than before, and the great clouds climbed higher and sent angry spurs of black flitting up on the misty sky. The waves crashed as they hit the rocks, and their foam leapt up and hung fiercely in the air before disappearing. In front of him, at the mouth of the firth, was a small island, and on it the ruins of a cloister, founded how many centuries ago, for the reclamation of the wild men of the Highland West. But the old faith had gone with many other things, with raidings and killings, and the rush of tribal chiefs, and trust and kinship, and respect and obedience; and the old walls on the island were broken and moss-grown, and within their enclosure only grass mounds and the rankness of thistle and nettle. Now on the Sabbath they had fear of God, a vindictive God, in the Free Church four miles across the moor, a bare, hard church, where the sheep-dogs scratched under their masters' seats, while the expounder of the Word hurled dreary comminations, with much gasping and thumping, from his wooden pulpit.

The air was always damp and misty and temperate, and the rain drove aslant stealthily over the sea to the moors and the bogs and the untidy crofts of the people. Over the firth, on the other

side, the hills rose in round vanishing curves of purple where the heather climbed down to the fresh green of the lower slopes. Pleasant streams of brown water plashed and hurried round boulders and past stony projections down the hillside to the pebbly beach and the waves of the sea. But the sea beat always against the shore, cold and grey, with a sound that was often wild and angry, and at best had in it treachery and the muttering of unstilled menace.

A hand was laid upon Duncan's shoulder, and a voice sounded suddenly in his ear.

"Come away, Duncan," it said, "it is time to be at the fishing."

The speaker was Duncan's elder brother, David Macdonald, with whom he shared the small cottage and their fishing boat. Ugly to look upon, terrifying, was David, for he was misshapen from birth, and his large head sank without neck to be seen on his broad straight shoulders, like some horrible children's toy. His arms were long and his fingers reached nearly to his ankles, while his mouth was fixed from childhood in a twist and his brow was knotted by the wrinkles of sorrow. The two brothers had always lived here together in the croft on the loch, where the Atlantic rolls fiercely against Skye and the coasts of the West High-

lands, growing oats in the poor patches round their house, and fishing together in their poor boat.

Even when, four years ago, Duncan had brought a wife home with him to the loch-side, the elder brother had not needed to leave, but stayed on, helping and sharing in meat and labour as he had been used to do before a woman had come to their home. They lived, as it were, on the edge of the world, and their living was hard and scarce and precarious. Oatmeal and the milk of their cow was the most of their food, with the fish of the sea that they caught when it was not too stormy. Now and then they had mutton when a sheep had been ill with braxie, and occasionally they could get a few eggs from their hens. In the summer, when steamers passed every day and travellers occasionally came to the village hotel ten miles away, and when there were gentlemen to shoot grouse on the moors, things would be better, and they could get a few little luxuries at the merchant's, and earn money as beaters for the sportsmen. But all through the winter and the cruel stormy spring they were alone, except for the Sabbath greetings in the churchyard; and fish were hard to be got, and the cow's milk would give out, and there were

bitter days and nights to pass in the cottage, with no solace except the chanting of a Gaelic hymn or the telling of old stories. Mostly on such days they sat silently round the peat fire, the two brothers smoking while the woman spun.

"Come away, Duncan," said the elder brother again. "The sky's not so good, and I'm thinking there may be an ill wind before morning. We'd best be off soon."

"Aye, aye, we'd best be going," answered the younger, without moving. They could hear the woman moaning within the house. The sound was quieter now, but it went on without ceasing.

"It'll may be an ill night," he added, "and I do not rightly like to leave her. Her time's awful near now, Davie, you ken."

The elder brother took him by the shoulder and shook him up.

"A mighty lot of good we would be, staying here, wouldn't we? Food'll be what she'll want soon, I'm thinking; and where's she to get that from if you sit here by the door, like a pillar of salt? Come away, man, and we'll be back before morning with a boat-load of herring, that'll do her more good than your shadow outside the door, glowering like a dafty into the darkness."

Duncan rose, giving in silently, as he usually

did, to his brother. He pulled on his heavy fishing-boots and got ready for the work. Before he went down to the boat he walked into the house and said good-night to the woman who lay moaning on the bed near the peat fire. She held his hand for a moment and pressed it.

"Do not heed about me," she said, "Duncan, my man."

And she smiled up at him as she spoke, and the light of love for an instant pierced through the clouds of pain. Then she turned again and began moaning. Duncan stood at the door, looking at her irresolutely, blaming himself that he was not able to help her in her pain, knowing himself useless, yet unwilling to leave.

"I 'll just round the hill," whispered his brother to him, "and tell Mistress Gillespie to look in on her."

Duncan walked slowly down to the beach and watched his brother's ill-made shape quickly shuffling round the bend of the hill. He was back almost before the boat had been got ready.

"She 'll be up presently," he said, as they pushed the boat heavily over the pebbles to the water. Then they lifted in the nets and pushed her out slowly with the oars. When she floated free they hoisted the lug-sail and tacked past

the island into the open sea. David sat in the middle, getting the nets ready for letting go, while Duncan held the tiller and guided her head slantwise over the rising waves. It was dark before they had got far out from shore, and the sky was black with thick masses of cloud to the west.

"We 'll not go far out the night," said David, turning his head round for a glimpse at the sky.

Duncan nodded, and bent over to help his brother with the nets. When they had sailed on into the west for another half-hour, they let down the nets and began to trawl, lighting their pipes and keeping an eye on the waters behind them. The air was full of moisture, and their clothes and the thwarts of the boat felt salt and clammy to the touch. Suddenly the nets began to drag, and they found themselves in a shoal of herring. After the shoal they shaped their way carefully that their nets should be filled and their boat be laden with fish. Then they stooped over and began to pull in the nets, and the nets came in heavily over the side, and the boat was soon filled with glistening, struggling fish, flapping wearily to suffocation in the air.

The men leant back for a minute's rest and began to talk.

"She was never strong," said Duncan, suddenly; and his brother knew that he spoke of his wife.

There was a pause, and then Duncan spoke again, and his voice had a tenderer note.

"It 's maybe come on her by now, and I 'm afraid. She was never strong."

"Eh, you 're aye late with your fears and your thoughts," muttered the other. "Pity you could not have thought before. But you' re aye sorry when it 's over late."

Duncan hardly heard him, and went on with his own thoughts. He spoke of their joys and their woes, and the misery of poverty and the hardship of work with little profit; and ever and again he harped back to his fears for the woman they had left in the cottage moaning. He did not notice that his brother had let his pipe go out and had laid it down, and now sat with his hands tight clenched on the seat like one that is choking down bitterness. He went on to speak of their early marriage days and the strange weakness that he feared in her health, and he wondered that for four years they had had no children, and that now this wonder had come to pass, when they expected it so little. She should never have had to work, he said, never have had to help in the fields and do all she had done for her man. And

the fear was upon him that after four years' barrenness she was not meant to bear children, and that it would now go ill with her in her labour.

Suddenly he felt himself caught tight by the shoulders, and his brother's breath hot upon his face.

"Hold your tongue!" cried David the deformed, shaking him, his voice trembling with passion. "Hold your tongue, you thing of idleness! It 's you have done the harm, for you knew all about her and yet pushed her into the abyss of death. What 's the use of your whining now? Pray for her, and put your trust in the Lord. Aye, and pray for yourself, too, for, sure as there is a God in heaven, I'll kill you if she dies!"

Duncan had at first been too astonished to move. Then he rose in the swaying boat and tried to grapple with his brother.

But at the last word the cripple shook him again violently and threw him backwards, while he himself sank down on his seat and covered his eyes with his hand.

Duncan picked himself up slowly.

"What 's taken you, Davie?" he said suspiciously. "She 's not your wife; my sorrow's not your sorrow." His voice rose to a cry of

doubt. "What do you mean, Davie? What is she to you?"

There was no answer, and his brother sat still in front of him with his hand pressed to his brow.

"She 's not your wife, Davie," he went on more excitedly. "She 's mine! What does it mean? My God! you've not been coveting my wife, your brother's wife? What does it mean? Speak, man! say something quickly, or, by the Lord, I'll make you say it with my hands on your throat!"

Then the elder brother burst out :—

"You're nothing but a fool, Duncan, and a fool you've always been. Because I'm not exactly well-shapen, do you think I 'm not a man? Why, you fool, I've always loved her since the day I first saw her. Aye, I loved her, and I knew that for all my looks I'd make her a better husband than you, that lets her toil and puts her in peril, and thinks all the time only of yourself! I've always been sorry for her sake that she took you for her husband, and many's the time that I've wondered at the folly of women that will marry a thing like you, because you are fair and straight, and will care for you and worship you, when you do nothing for her but just sit still and let her worship. Do I covet her? God in heaven! how do you think I should live four years under the

same roof with a sweet bit of a woman like yon, all rosy cheeks and full smiling lips, and black hair and eyes like sloes, and not covet her? I'm a man, too, you fool! Do you think me less of a man because my shoulders are not exactly right? Four years under the same roof, and I've watched her kiss you, and handle you, and follow your movements with her eyes like a sheep-dog's eyes on his master; and I've wanted only one look like that for myself, and never one look would she give. Oh, I ken she was kind to me and nice to me, and she never let on that she thought me strange or misshapen. But I could not help but love her, and she gave all her love to you. Aye, and to think that now she 's in danger, at this very moment maybe under the shadow of death; and that 's all your fault, when you knew she wasn't strong and that nature never meant her to have this labour. Brother or no brother, I'll kill you if she dies!"

Duncan Macdonald's face had turned whiter and whiter as he heard the queer quick speech fall through the darkness, and listened to a voice so changed that he barely knew it. The nerves of both the men had tightened to breaking-point under the strain of those hours that they had worked, and known the loved woman in danger

far away. Now the thought that his brother, the cripple, had let himself fall in love with his wife was enough to madden him. The jealousy of the savage was upon him, and he wished revenge. He rose up in the boat, and sprang over the moving mass of choking fish to his brother to clutch him by the throat.

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife!" he screamed. "And you—you were my brother!"

As he spoke they gripped. Neither knew what he wanted, what he meant to achieve. But both had the mad desire to hurt, and in struggle to gain relief from their own pain. They could feel the boat rocking, and they thought of the tumbling sea, and a vision of sombre satisfaction passed across their eyes—themselves in a sort of gloomy safety, watching a hated enemy struggling and drowning in the dark, cold sea. They gripped and wrestled and clutched. Twice they fell over the seats, and heads struck on wood, and their jerseys and faces and hands were slimy and covered with fishes' scales, and their knuckles bled where they had hit on the thwarts.

Then, all of a sudden, on the rocking, jibbing boat burst the fury of the storm. All but over went the boat, and a wave curled over the gunwale. The men were flung down by the force of

the blow, and the sail was reft into tatters. The boat leapt and turned on the crests and into the trough like a mad thing. The elder brother was the first to come back to his senses.

"Get to the tiller, Duncan!" he cried, and took away his hands. "I'll take the oars; and, for the Lord's sake, keep her head straight to the waves. It 's no time for fighting now."

Duncan picked himself up sullenly and crept his way to the tiller. Then hour after hour they laboured to keep her head to the waves and to right her as she leaned over at the blows of the leaping water. Through the roar of the storm they had to shout directions to each other, and the spray soaked them from head to foot, and the wind made them shiver, and fingers were blistered and grew numb, and hope seemed to go, and only fatigue and the thoughtlessness of exhausted effort remained. Only at the dawning was the storm laid, and with the rising of the sun did the waves abate. They looked in the new light on a grey sky and on an angry sea, but the violence had been stilled and the fury had departed. At last they could turn the boat's nose and make wearily for the mainland. They took it in turns now to row and steer. They were cold, and they wanted comfort; tired, and they

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needed rest. The weary eyes had a look of forlorn friendliness, as of those that crave kindliness in the sharers of misfortune. The frenzies of the night had been dissipated in the agony of impending death.

At last Duncan spoke.

"The mercy of God is aye wonderful," he said. "Man, I never thought to have seen another day."

"Aye," said David, "the Lord be thanked for His mercies. And you worked like a man, Duncan laddie, or we could never have won through."

Then they remained silent, while they quickly rowed through the troubled waters to their haven. The way was still long and the men were very weary. It was well on in the day when they beached their boat again opposite the old monastery and the island.

They were met on the slope of the hill below the croft by the neighbour's wife who had spent the night in their cottage. To their looks of inquiry she beamed a cheery smile.

"It 's all over now, and it 's a boy, and they're both gey fine. But, man, she was mighty feared for you this awful night."

They went up to the cottage, and David sat down outside while the woman's husband went

in. It was a long time till he came out, and David lit his pipe and started smoking.

At last Duncan opened the door again and came out.

"She 's all right," he said, "and doing well."

"Ah, well!" said Davie, getting up slowly, "I'm thinking I'll be getting down to the boat and looking after the nets."

Duncan stood at the door with his hand on the latch, and on his face was a look of shyness. At last he spoke again.

"We're going to call him David," he said. "She wants it, and I'm all for David, too. And we're brothers, you ken."

"That 's God's own truth," answered the cripple, and walked slowly towards the beach.

AN INDIAN WIDOW

AN INDIAN WIDOW

DAILY I used to pass him seated under the mango-tree which he had made his own, as I went for my morning ride or walked out of an evening, gun on shoulder, to look for the quail or a stray hare. Always he was the same, seated cross-legged on a dappled panther's skin, his long hair coiled round and round into a knot on the slope of his head, the red mark of the Preserving God drawn down upon his forehead, with a cloth of dirty ochre hitched from the shoulder to the thigh. Usually he sat motionless, only the rosary of basil beads slipping through his fingers, as he muttered mysterious verses wherein are comprised the secrets of God and man. Gravely he used to lift his hand as I passed, giving the benediction, while I nodded and called a salutation.

As it happened, my stay at the village of Khas was longer than I had expected; and in the end the whole of the cold months had passed—with their frosty nights and biting mornings and the shrill cry of the duck winging their way to the reeds with the sunset—and April had begun, with

its furnace-blasts and the new shoots on the trees and the mango-fruits ripening to the plucking, before I could think of leaving the little village, with its friendly people and the inquiry into customary rights with which I had been busied. So month after month, passing the hermit under his tree, I had gradually fallen into the way of stopping after our greeting to talk a little of the country and its people, of the mysterious nexus between mind and body, and the teachings of pantheistic philosophy. From the first I had been pleasantly impressed by the absence from his features of those lines of sensuality and treachery which only too usually mar the face of the Hindu ascetic, as in all countries that of the priest or the preacher. His was rather the face of a scholar, of an ascetic, one might say, in the true sense of one practising himself in mental discipline. Harmony, power, self-restraint, these were the qualities that appeared. His powerful frame was clean of all superfluity of fat or tissue, yet the muscles stood out in beautiful curves of strength. The broad chest, just sufficiently clothed in flesh, rose and sank softly with his regular breathing. Yet one had only to look at his face to see that the powerful body was under the constant control of spiritual volition; rather,

indeed, that it owed its power to the harmonious discipline of mind, that it was used, as it were, only as an instrument to completer perfection of faculty.

With longer acquaintance I found this impression always more clearly bitten. Soon I felt myself growing into real friendliness with the "Bairagi", as the villagers called him, and more and more reliant, as the days went on, upon the evening hours when I could go and sit with him beside his tree and talk with him of forgotten legends and obsolescent creeds, and the persistent problems of humanity. Much I learned from him of the life of the village and the incidents of its domesticity; but more still and more valuable was the knowledge I gained of a people's ideals and the national response to the great questions of freedom, of self, and of the absolute. Of the teachings of the Vedanta philosophy I heard something, that philosophy which, one may say, is the official expression of Hinduism; of the Kabirpanth which in creedless pantheism assimilated the doctrines of the Persian Sufis, and sought to combine Islam and the Hindu world in unsectarian unity; of the Vallabhachariya, with its reliance upon grace and divine ecstasy and its revolt against traditional asceticism.

The villagers, seeing me friendly with the Bairagi, became in turn more happily intimate, and I was able to catch many a glimpse of their mind and life which would ordinarily have remained hidden. For they were all on the best of terms with him, and in place of the awful terror that too often surrounds the religious mendicant or the hermit was only affection and a sort of respectful familiarity. Even the children used to come and play freely found the tree and call him "grandpapa", and carry away the flowers or fruits which he loved to give.

Of himself, however, and his life in the world he would never speak.

"I have no past," he would say, when I pressed him. "I forsook it with my name when I repeated the verse of initiation."

I had, therefore, given up the wish to explore his past history. But I found it pleasant to observe his sympathy with those still bound on the Wheel of Desire, especially with little children and with women.

"Children and women," he would say in excuse, "live simply in the Universal Thought by the ways of instinct and emotion. And in them can be known the absolute will, the thought of God the Preserver, God the Giver of love, often

perhaps deflected from right response by the sins of former lives, but still sweet with the breath of God."

The day, however, came at last when my work was done, and it was time for me to leave the village of Khas and return to the district head-quarters. For a week my head-clerk had been hinting that there was nothing left to be done, and that the final drafting of my report could be more easily accomplished in my office with the former files at hand, on which, in fading ink, were recorded the opinions of bygone Revenue officers. I could not blame him, poor man, for his hurry. He was anxious to see his wife and children, left behind according to custom, while we were on tour in the villages of the district, to look after the stern dark house in the narrow but aristocratic lane where his forefathers had lived for four centuries. So my larger tents were struck, and my camping-ground was loud with the oaths of cartmen and the bellowing of bullocks and the sounds of packing and departure. Only one small sleeping-tent remained to serve me for the night and to follow me on the morrow. I ate my dinner outside by the light of a feeble lamp, while the bells on the bullocks' necks jingled at each movement. The melancholy of a dismantled encamp-

ment struck chill upon my heart; and I said, like the Persian poet, that the life of man is the march of a caravan through a desert, and the jingling bell the signal to strike camp in darkness. I lit a cigarette, but the grey whirls of thinning smoke, slowly absorbed in the pervading air, increased my sadness and added to the general feeling of the vanity of all things. I could not sit still, but rose and threaded my way impatiently between carts and the horns of staring, starting cattle and the bustle of hurrying servants. Finally, I took my stick and a lantern, and set off by myself to the ascetic's tree.

"You are misled by the phantasms of existence," he said, as he greeted me. "But you are young, and desire and belief in self is the part of youth. Only by years and the passing of time does one learn that what is real is that only which has no self. Sit down, and I will tell you a story of desire and youth. It may purge your mind of its sadness."

When I had sat down, the Bairagi repeated in a soft murmur, as to himself, some Sanskrit verses. Then he poked the smouldering logs of wood at our feet with his sharpened iron tongs and began the following tale:—

An Indian Widow

"Himmatsing was the second son of a Rajput noble, whose estates lay in Mewar, where exactly it is not necessary to disclose. The estate was of moderate size, neither princely in magnificence nor fraught with impoverished pride, like the holdings of the lesser Rajput gentry. The family mansion was not a palace, but it was a house sufficiently comfortable, with stabling for two dozen bullocks and eight or nine horses. The servants were all family retainers, whose forefathers had for many generations been married and born and bred in the great house, and who shared as by right in the family life and secrets. The mansion was plain and whitewashed, and looked perhaps too like a farmhouse, but the walls were of massive stone under the whitewash, and the door to the central court, which formed the fourth side of a square with the buildings, was of thick wood, firmly studded with pointed iron. It could have been defended at a pinch.

"At the time that I tell of, Himmatsing was twenty-two years old. He had been married some years before, as our custom is, but his wife had died of a fever, almost one might say without knowing her husband. His parents had not yet been able to afford him another marriage. So he lived in the old mansion, read a little, and shot

and hunted a great deal. You know, Sahib, what the Mewar jungles are like. They grip the heart, and he who has once trodden their paths can never forget. He longs always to hear the broad dry leaves of the teak-trees crackle under his feet and to smell the sharp scent of burning wood borne on the breeze from the Bhil huts in the clearing. Over thigh and waist stands the spear-grass and the lumps of quartz rattle at your tread down the dry gorges and ravines. Round the slender teak stems grow bushes of *kankra*, whose leaves can be stitched into cups and plates. As the panther moves from his lair, the grey-whiskered monkeys with their long tails gibber and jeer at the beast of prey. The peacock, screeching, flies heavily down the glade, and a black python flings his undulating curves down the hill-side in rapid escape as he hears your footstep. The stag rushes noisily through the forest, and the gazelle browses warily in the moist grass near a streamlet. Yes, the forest for Rajput or Bhil! With gun on shoulder or with bow and arrow in hand, what joy, when one is fresh and strong, to stalk stealthily on the rocky hill-side and seek the panther, the wild pig, or the deer. Even for the old ascetic the scent of the woods is pleasant, and the flight of the birds that pass, and the growth of the flowers

in the clefts of the rocks. For they, too, are of the thought of God, and the mind, unspurred by the passions of men, can there the more easily be at one with His thought.

"Well, among the friends of Himmatsing was a young Brahman of twenty-five, Hirashankar by name, clever, ambitious, just entered into the Thakor's service. The Brahman was shrewd enough to foresee the advantages he would gain from intimacy with the Thakor's son. So he made himself useful in a hundred ways, was always ready and amicable, with an assumed frankness that veiled flattery under the cloak of criticism and reproach. Hirashankar was no bungler, and he knew that open subservience would disgust a boy like Himmatsing. And he had learned also the great lesson of the courtier, that the subtlest flattery is to blame a man for excess of the very qualities that are generally held to be manly.

"'You are too rash,' he would say to Himmatsing, as they sat together of a morning on the balcony outside of the young man's bedroom. 'You might have been killed yesterday when you followed the wounded panther into the bushes. A wise man does not do such things. You ought to know better.'

"But the young man only laughed.

"'You are a priest and a clerk. Wisdom is for you and caution. But I am a Rajput. And besides, there was really no danger.'

"Hirashankar frowned and looked reproachfully, but inwardly he rejoiced all the while that by his speech he encouraged that rather contemptuous familiarity which most endears the inferior to the careless master.

"Or again he would blame the young Rajput for excess of generosity.

"'Extravagance will be your ruin,' he remarked more than once. And he would recite instances. 'There was no need to give ten rupees to that beggared minstrel, or to fling a banknote in the lap of the smirking nautch-girl. Money is oil for the lamp of life and must needs be carefully husbanded.'

"And Himmatsing would inscribe the reproach, lightly, to his credit, and liked the young Brahman the better for seeing reflected on the cracked mirror of his soul his own gentler outlines.

"Thus slowly the Brahman mined his way to the bastion of the young noble's affection. And as he studied his nature, he found that Himmatsing was often restless and impatient, petulant in the morning when he rose, excited and over-stimu-

lated when he went to bed. For the Rajput was but twenty-two, was strong and healthy and affectionate; and he lived alone without wife or mistress. Not in vain had the Brahman studied Vatsayana and the Gospel of Love. And he bethought himself that in a woman he might find the ladder by which to escalade the citadel of the young Chief's resolution. And his mind became fixed on the quest for the woman.

"Six miles away was the little market-town of Aslali; and in it the home of Hirashankar's family. His uncle Devshankar still lived there in the ancestral home, partly priest, partly small landlord, partly banker. He was a man of gentle piety, much respected, in municipal affairs a councillor of weight, whom none passed without salutation, venerable to the people, and himself busied in the veneration of God. In the house of his uncle the shrewder, worldlier nephew now became a constant visitor. The older uncle and aunt, in their life of quietude, were amused by his wit and worldly cynicism. They admired him for his cleverness, and saw in him one who should raise the name of the family and obtain for it high position in the State and great possessions. They deferred to his counsels, hearkening quietly

when he spoke of his ambitions and his present means. But to Hirashankar the attraction of the house lay not in his uncle and aunt—though he had for them both a true, if condescending, regard; lay not even in the sense of home and conscious ancestral pride in the long line of holy Brahmans who had held it; but was centred rather in the person of his cousin, the only daughter of the old couple. Dressed simply, without jewellery, she used to carry the waterpots from the well up the rough road through the dusty little garden into the house, and she walked supplely and straightly, like a cypress. The dark mantle fell in graceful folds over her neck and shoulders and clung to the round shields and tiny bosses of her breasts. He was seated idly on the swinging bench in the verandah one day, while she crouched on the ground and scoured the cooking-vessels with fresh earth. Her back was towards him and she bent well forward as she turned the brass pots and hummed lightly at her work. As he watched the moving curves of her back, he made a sudden gesture. Not for himself, indeed, was the interest with which he gazed upon her beauty; for, being cousin, she was his sister, to himself a thing untouched, untouchable. But for its value to another, who should be his patron,

he appraised her long hair and the fine contour of her face.

"Umabai, then eighteen, was a virgin widow. At the age of four she had been wedded for life and after death, with sprinklings of blessed water and the flames of the holy fire, consecrated by the priest, whose word was the pronouncement of an immemorial system, to a Brahman boy of six, both elect by the decree of the stars and the choice of their parents to fulfil in symbolic unity the duties to the race that might be required by destiny. And in two more years he died; and she was left to expiate in lifelong virginity those errors in her ante-natal existence that had so fatally flawed the stem of their common growth. For acquiescence in deprivation is the price demanded by the gods of the people for atonement.

"Her husband had died so young that her new family, who had lived in straitened circumstances, gladly ceded to the father who had begotten her their claims on the girl who had now by fate become a daughter while they were bereft of a son. In place of the proper subordination that would have trained the happily married woman and the mother to her part in the structure of the family and her customary duties in life, she was left to

the house where she had been born, to the mother [illegible] nursed her and the father who had [illegible] her early years. As no sons had been [illegible] in the house, it happened easily that she was treated with an indulgence unsuited to the widow's part of atonement and renunciation. She was a child, Sahib, soft and tender, with winning smiles and little gestures; and the love of father and mother is stronger than all the man-made gods. Forgetting that she was a woman and no boy, her stage in life no virile action, the faith she had, without thought of the relative duties of station, taught her to accomplishment in the [illegible] writings and instilled the elements of the sacred language. Thus she had herself developed, had obtained perhaps a greater value and a fairer perfection, but had grown to a height above the customary restrictions of her class, the prescriptions of the Brahman widow, pressed upon her like the bars of a prison.

'Her own character will keep her from evil,' said Deoshankar, when the mother, affrighted at the neglect of tradition, had opposed the girl's education.

'Has she ever shown sign of vanity or of [illegible]?'

'But she is a widow,' sighed the mother.

'We know not the purposes of God, but surely knowledge is not for her, or the pleasures of fulfilled life.'

"'She is also a human being,' answered the father, 'and there is her own mind and character to be thought of. As she is deprived by destiny of the ordinary happiness of womankind, let her have at least the pleasures of thought and the enjoyment of poetry.'

"Yet listen, Sahib, it is an old man's word. We are all bound in the bonds of this world, and, for those who must live in the world, not the unlimited expansion of sense and thought, but the habituation to customary duty is the best of trainings. Umabai had to live in her home, in her own village, in her own caste and station; and the lesser in life—a life maimed and crippled by the old law of the people—was for her the better, even (who shall say?) the higher. For her—a widow, a Brahman, and a girl—goodness itself was evil; for the evil decreed by the people and the sacred law should have been her chosen good. The world itself is an evil, brother. Yea! by the great God!

"Well, she was now eighteen, sweet and gentle in action, and beautiful to the sight. Her cousin looked on her and smiled and thought of the

Rajput youth so gallant and so lonely. When they sat at dusk in the quiet Brahman house, the girl a little aside, and the uncle beside the nephew, he would talk of the young man and praise his looks and his high spirit.

"'There is a nobleman for you,' he would cry in a burst of admiration, half simulated and yet not insincere. 'Generous, he does not care what he gives, and deprives himself for the benefit of the needy. He is courageous, so that there is neither wild beast nor savage man that he fears. And he is handsome, so that Arjun or Rama himself were in his presence like a star before the moon.'

"'Tell us what he has been doing,' the old man would say. 'Has he killed another tiger? And how did he look in the last darbar?'

"Then Hirashankar would paint adventure, limning with fond emphasis the lineaments of a gallant youth.

"'See how he sits his horse,' he would say, 'as if he were grown upon its back. His shoulders back, his heels well down, hands at the withers, thigh tight to saddle; yielding to every toss and prance, he is yet master of his mount through every curvet and every change of foot. At the wildest gallop, spear in hand, he pierces the ring,

and reins his horse dead stopped upon its haunches, the jaw held tight to the chest.'

"Or, again, he would speak of his mental powers and his grasp of character.

"'Always kind and approachable,' he declared, 'he can still be firm and strong. When he resolves, his mouth shuts tight and his chin looks as if cast in bronze. Oppression and trickery he cannot bear, and his voice speaks disaster to the cringing money-lender or the rogue attorney.'

"And the girl, sitting apart, would listen eagerly to the picture of one who was indeed a man. At night, in her bed-chamber, she applied to what she had heard the descriptions of the good king Nal from the Indian poem, or repeated verses from the epic of the Pandhavs and the Kouravs, rich with royal quality and achievement. Not very slowly, as she listened and adorned the image with the associations of remembered poetry, she turned to admiration and a longing to see, even for an instant, one so worthy of woman's love. But she remembered that she was a widow, sacred to expiation, and stifled longing in a sigh.

" With the young Rajput, too, Hirashankar had not been idle, and he found his task there easier. Young men may easily talk of women, and the strain in the Rajput's mind was soothed and

slackened by the very name of love. Not directly, but with a thousand hints, the Brahman sowed in his thought the suggestion that love was sweet, and that he needed the company of a well-loved woman. And the Rajput, so strong in the field or the court of justice, was weak before the pleasant dream that would smile to him through his work and mock him in the wakeful hours of the night.

"'Only when there are two together,' Hirashankar said one day, 'can happiness flower on the tree of life. Man without woman is but half a man.'

"'That is a true word,' answered the Rajput. 'But the right woman comes at the hour of fate!'

"One day, soon after dawn, Hirashankar went out riding with the young Rajput. As if by accident he reminded him of fields to be seen and a sugar-cane plantation to be examined by the side of Aslali. And he led him across by the river, where, secluded between high banks, it forms deep pools between rugged rocks. As they threaded their way down the steep path cut in the bank, the Rajput leading, they saw suddenly before them a girl bathing. It was Umabai, the young widow. She was standing, half turned

away, stooping slightly forward in graceful curve, while she let the water trickle over breast and shoulders from her joined hands. The dark-blue cotton gown—her only dress—soaked from the bath, clung in tight-fitting folds over breast and back. The fairness of her body shone through the thin stuff like the moon through a floating mantle of light clouds. Then a pebble rattled under the horse's foot, and she turned, in quiet surprise, to find the young man's eyes fixed eagerly on her beauty. Blushing, she pulled the end of her gown from her head across her face and shyly turned away from the riders. As he saw the movement, the young man was ashamed, and, giving his horse the rein, passed quickly over the ford. But as he reached the other side, involuntarily, almost unconsciously, he turned again in his saddle, and found the girl, poised motionless like a statue, gazing after his path. A look passed, short in time, but enough to hold all eternity.

"Another time within the week they again met thus, as it were by accident, really by decree of fate working through Hirashankar, as he rode and she returned homewards from the temple. And this time the Rajput heard from Hirashankar, as if half unwillingly in a lightly thrown confidence, that the girl was the Brahman's cousin.

And to either the Brahman spoke, deftly, with the lightest touch and the mere shadow of suggestion of the other's admiration, and he hinted the wish for another meeting. In the hearts of both the wish, so lightly blown by the winds of fate, took root, and the flame flower of desire came quickly to its blossom. You see, Sahib, how they were. There was no word of will. They were moved without choice by the forces of life.

"Do you wish to hear more, Sahib?" the Bairagi added after a minute. "By Shri Gopal, it is only an old tale."

"Speak on," I answered. "From your mouth it comes sweetly, Maharaj. The old words are other than the new."

The Bairagi ran his beads through his fingers, and the Sanskrit verses slipped softly through his half-closed lips. He propped his crutch under his arm and sat, with joined hands, one leg crossed at right angles over the other. Then he spoke again.

"I will not tell you, Sahib, the tale of their further meeting and their mating. I have long forsaken pleasure and the words of love are not suited to my lips. Enough that they were young, both lonely, both on fire with passion. What was there that should keep them asunder? Illusion

hung upon them like a mist, and the forms of the outer world were magnified and embellished. They met and loved, and often met and again loved. She yielded to nature, naturally, without shame, as the pure yield, with a being uplifted to the highest law. Rather she found pride in her act and the happiness of fulfilment. Not that she had no pangs, no anguish. There were moments when the ecstasy left her and she awoke to the unrealities of daily life. More than he, she feared the future, looked vaguely into the gaping abyss with a gasp of terror and at her heart the chill of abandonment. He had in his blood the traditions of a warrior race, and the wine seemed to him made for drinking and a girl to be kissed. 'A horse, a sword, and a woman!' such had of old been the Rajput's answer to destiny. They loved lightly and gaily, just as they fought, these old Rajputs. The world was before them, an apple to be plucked, a flagon to be uncorked, without reproach and without talk of why and wherefore. He found Umabai good to be kissed, sweet to be nursed upon his knee, and he liked to lose his fingers in her black tresses and to smooth his hand over the velvet softness of her limbs. He loved gallantly, heedlessly, with a toss of his head to the world, as an officer carries the ensign

through bullets to the enemy's lines. But she had thought of her woman's task tossed aside, not lightly, but under compulsion half regretfully, and the fear of the unknown, and the woman's instinct to routine and the habitude of usual life. But Nature, when she doubles the pain, gives with it more than the force to endure her pangs and the strength to enjoy her pleasures. Umabai loved, and in the worship of her lover she found an armament against all the world.

"'It is a sin,' she said more than once, as she lay with her lover on the grass couch they had made for themselves in the woods. 'A sin, but yet—it is sweet. I a Brahman, you a Rajput; I a widow, you——.'

"'I your own beloved lord,' he interrupted. 'It is a sin to be afraid and flinch before death, or even punishment; but in the enjoyment of what the divinity has given, body and mind and health, where is the sin? Think only of this: that you and I have been two, and now are one; and leave sin to the Brahman or the ascetic priest.'

"'Nay, lord,' she answered smiling, though her lips still drooped a little at the corners. 'It is a sin, for I should be punished, were it known. And in the Scriptures, they say, it is ordered that

a widow remain pure for the atonement of her former faults.'

"'In the Scriptures,' he answered, 'are written many things. But Brahman maidens have been loved by many a Rajput in the past. As for your marriage, marriage I do not hold it. Never can you have committed sin in any life, my beautiful. Rather the Brahmans were mistaken and read the horoscopes wrong. Your husband died without fault of yours, simply because he never was intended to be yours. There can be no sin in you. Or, if sin there be, God is my witness, dearest, that I take it all on my own head.'

"But she closed his lips with a kiss.

"'Hush, hush,' she answered, 'leave me my sin for myself. It may yet be my consolation. And in any case I bear it without shame, for I am content through all the ages to suffer for your sake. On you my sin shall be never laid.'

"Thus they loved, fearfully, with love in a double flood to drown fears. Often they used to meet, in the day, when the noontide sun had laid all the world to sleep, beside a brook on the hillside, well covered with trees of mango and *mhowra*. And they kissed in a hurry, jealous of the passing time, seizing happiness for a moment with full hands. She was all goodness, with a simple sympathy for

all living things, unspoilt by the forced artifice of women.

"'There is sin,' she again said, 'for I am too happy in your arms. Where there is duty, enjoyment must be less keen. Ah! my love, pleasure like this must be payment for suffering to come.'

"And again he laughed at her fears, and told her that pleasure was the golden fruit of a right life, rightly accorded.

"'You are happy because you are at last a woman,' he would say. 'That which you do is the hope and life of all women.'

"'So also is denial the life of woman,' she answered with a sigh.

"'Denial, or enjoyment?' he replied. 'Only the great God can know when each is right. What we do, we do by His will, and we have found it good. Wave your lamps round the God's head in the temple and hang flowers upon His neck, and He will pardon us for this draught of His life.'

"She smiled.

"'My Krishna you! and I am the milkmaid that dances to your flute. You are for me God living, my Rama; here is the wood of Brindában; and you are kind only to me. What need can I have of other gods?'

"Jay Krishna! It was the love of youth, Sahib.

Such were they, Umabai and the Rajput Himmatsing. Many days have gone, and they were young then. Yea, by the Great God, they were young.

"But at last that trouble came which from the first they should have expected. Umabai became big with child. Love had made them blind and they had forgotten. Now the penalty came at Nature's hand for Nature's joy, and the laws they had broken were to assert their majesty by the manifestation of the forbidden fruit. Here at last was for both a living terror, human law incarnate for punishment and revenge.

"They met now tearfully, their gaze turned on the teeming trees and flower-laden grasses, fearing to read in each other's eyes apprehension of coming evil. The reflected selves in the loved one's eyes were like little children smiling through the waters of woe.

"'My mother suspects,' she whispered. 'She has hinted at vague things.'

"'Your mother has before now suspected our love,' he said. 'I have given her many gifts, and to your father I have given land, and through me Hirashankar has been raised in rank. But they took no heed, for they saw before them the promise of much advantage, and they were not obliged to have knowledge.'

"She heard with surprise, and she asked him eagerly of the things that had been hidden from her eyes. But she came back at last to her sorrow.

"'They were kind while they might be,' she said; 'and they shut their eyes to our love, while it was only love, for they have always cherished me. But now it is plain for all to know, and that is more than my family can endure. They will never bear the whispered comment as it grows louder to outspoken curses, and then, last of all, the caste meeting and the penalties, the final disgrace.'

"'A pilgrimage?' he queried. 'Shall we seek safety where we are unknown?'

"But it was already too late, and the malicious whisper had crept through the quiet streets of the little town. To seek flight then would have been to abandon love and the sweets of life for a certain defeat, reputation overborne in a mob-charge. Rather death seemed better to the girl in the full victory of love.

"'We will face it out,' he answered finally. 'Am I not the prince? my father chief of the land? Who will say anything where my arm is strong?'

"'My father—' she murmured faintly, but the thought died to a better life beneath the

raining kisses. Gradually the smile came back stealthily to the corners of her lips, and her eyes grew bright, and she flung her arms round his neck and pressed his head softly against her breast. Cheek against cheek, they were again lovers, tenderer perhaps, not less passionate.

"But the danger grew closer and the future more manifest. Love was now their only joy and there was a bitterer exultation in the pleasures of meeting. They clung to each other fondly, as finding comfort in each other's company against a common peril. Never had their love been sweeter than now when they bore it fiercely against a threatening world.

"A fortnight later there was a festival of the gods and a feast was made ready in the house of Devshankar. Hirashankar was there and Devshankar and a younger cousin, and behind them waited mother and daughter, as is right. In the dark room the shadows were cleft by the soft light of two lamps, and before the household idol the flowers of *champak* and of marigold made the air heavy with their odours. The purple silk clothes of the diners had a sombre note, and the sacred threads hung over their bared chests like sword-belts. As they sat in exact line, each cross-legged on his separate wooden square, their

shadows were thrown on the ochred walls like menacing grotesques. The girl went to and fro, carrying sweets and water. She stooped with an effort now.

"When they had done, they rose and rinsed their fingers. The two women, mother and daughter, in turn sat down to their food. And, as they sat down, the mother fetched, in a separate dish of stitched leaves, a mixture of chillies and lentil soup. She put it before Umabai and her finger pointed an imperative to the girl. The men stood at the door, immobile, their gaze afar, as if looking into distant worlds of ideal ordinance. Suddenly the girl understood, and was cold with the icy touch of impending dissolution. Half she rose from her seat and her lips opened to an unuttered word. The finger which had played with her infant lips still pointed, motionless, straight, like the finger of doom. It had never struck her before how thin it was. Until now she had always thought of her mother as of something rounded and soft. But of a sudden she could see the skin as it was, drawn in sharp lines, and the knuckle-bone looked gnarled and worn. She made a gesture with her hand, vague and helpless. She seemed to be only a thing of memory, without will.

"'Drink then, dearest,' said the mother. 'It

is the only way. You should have been a Brahman widow, and you were too much a woman.'

"Then, as the girl looked at her with cold eyes, she added, 'See, dearest, your mother drinks with you.'

"Slowly and calmly the elder woman raised the cup to her lips and drank. Vaguely, with a terror that left no room for thought, the girl's eyes followed the action. She saw the throat rise and fall in swallowing. The dish was set down before Umabai, half empty. She looked round. The men still stood at the door, immobile. From their lips she could just catch the sound of a muttered prayer.

"She raised the cup. 'My beloved!' she said, and emptied it. As she tried to set it down, it slipped from her fingers.

. . . . . .

"Only after they had returned from the burning-place did Himmatsing hear what had happened. For some months he was ill. Then he travelled to the Ganges and learned austerities from a holy teacher. In the overcoming of sense he found hope and consolation. Then he became a devotee of God the Preserver. He sits alone under a tree like me; and finds peace in the thought of death

and a free existence, lover and loved united, after death."

He stopped.

"Then you—," I asked, "you are Himmatsing?"

"Do not ask who I was," he answered. "It is seldom that I myself remember, only when I speak foolish things. What I am, that you see. I belong to those that do not know time and have forgotten self. In the immanent love that is in all things, in the flowers that bud and bloom and wither, in the rain that swishes over the springing crops and flings itself on the hill-scarps, in the beasts that struggle and tear, in all those is God, and in all am I."

. . . . . .

The stars were blurring in the first grey of dawn when I returned to my solitary camp. Two hours later I rode away from Khas and have never returned. I often wonder if the old ascetic is there still, under his tree.

THE CHOICE

THE CHOICE

A SMALL party of us were sitting under the trees on the lawn. At our feet the olive-green river slowly curled its way through the edging rushes. The pink and white flowers of the may diffused their lazy scent through the still warm air, and the yellow blossom of laburnum drooped motionless over the gravel paths. The flight of insects filled the garden with an even hum of soothing sound, and bumble-bees whirred heavily from hollyhock to mignonette. Further down the reach the square tower of the abbey could be seen above the bushes, its ivy a darker stain on the glossy surface of the Thames. A few skiffs and ever and again a narrow punt passed idly with the stream, a girl's white hand dangling in the water, a touch of gold on the wrist perhaps, or a splash of colour from silk cushions. Coffee and liqueurs had been left on a cane table, and we lay back sluggishly in our chairs, watching the grey smoke of our cigarettes slowly dissolving in the still air.

We were a party of men—five of us, old friends,

down for the week-end at Lord Farstinfield's river cottage. We had spent the morning rowing or paddling in canoes. Luncheon over, we had come to the lawn for a lazy afternoon. Books and papers lay about us—the *Referee*, the *Figaro Illustré*, Tibullus, Baudelaire, the *Pink 'Un*. But there was peace upon us, too heavy even for books, and we found joy in inactivity.

Preston, his hands clasped behind his neck, began suddenly to murmur verses :

"The long, lithe arms and hotter hands than fire,"

he quoted lazily.

Preston was the youngest of the party, a Secretary of Legation now on leave. He sometimes professed a vague cult of eroticism and rapture, played polo, and did his official work well and thoroughly.

" Have another drink, Preston, old chap," said Farstinfield, hurriedly. " I can stand most things, but Swinburne just now I will *not* stand."

Then, as he saw Preston grin maliciously, he added :

"It's too nice and sunny a day for studio erotics anyway ; and besides I 'm fed up with my blessed committee on Divorce. Laugh away, you fellows, but it's no joke, listening to all sorts of persons with red ties and straggling hair giving

evidence about the inborn right of women to be immoral and all that sort of rot."

Lord Farstinfield was a young peer, who had taken his duties seriously and was a constant attendant at the House. Without any particular originality or wealth of ideas, he was energetic, conscientious, and sensible. He would have made a successful civil servant, and was a fair and popular landlord. At that moment he was chairman of a mixed Parliamentary Committee on Divorce Reform ; and his friends already forecast his future as an Under-Secretary.

"That sort of thing *is* rot," murmured Brinson, from the grass, after a pause. "I have no patience with all those serious soulful people who always put the blame on the man and talk of equal duties for both sexes."

Sir John Brinson was certainly the cleverest of our party. As he lay on the grass at our feet, his head pillowed on a couple of cushions, quietly pulling at his pipe, he bore his forty years gallantly, with an air of youth and good humour. The face was still full and unwrinkled, and the rounded lips showed at their corners only the crinkles of a slightly saddened laughter. Perhaps the eyelids, a little weary, marked faint traces of twenty years of experienced passion and restrained indulgence.

He had inherited the baronetcy while still an undergraduate at Merton, where, after an unhesitating third in Mods., he had astonished his tutors by a vivid grasp of philosophy and a good First in Greats. He had hunted with the Bicester and the South Oxfordshire, rowed two years in the College Eight, had gambled and wined and read and reflected. "An all-round life, every desire satisfied and none sated"—this was the ethic he professed, and he quoted freely from Plato in its defence. After taking his degree, which proctorial discipline had at one time seemed likely to obstruct, he had travelled extensively in Greece and Italy. Returning, he had entered the greater world, belonged to the Celibates' Club, and dined gaily with the younger men in the bright room beneath which rushes the torrent of Piccadilly. But he had no liking for the silly fashions of the wealthy mob, and despised the successes of what is still called Society. He lived his own life with his own friends, heedless of modes and reputation. Then he had gone abroad again, had wintered in India, shot in the pine forests of Kashmir and the windy rocky heights of Ladakh, and languished in the steamy marshes of Assam. Too proud and too lazy to hide his pleasures from a world whose standards he had transcended, he

was regarded at forty as a dangerous man by the mothers whose daughters he had not sought to marry. His weaknesses were a collection of eighteenth-century engravings and the breeding of Arab horses.

"I believe servant girls are different," he resumed after a minute, "but with us I am sure it is always the woman who seduces the man. No woman falls unless she has wished to stumble. We men are the passive instruments of their vengeances and their dreams."

"Come, come," said Farstinfield, "that is surely rather too much to say, Jack. After all, every woman is not a rake, in spite of Pope. And the man may surprise her by a sudden declaration, may carry her off her feet, before she has seen the precipice."

"Every woman foretells the coming declaration," answered Brinson, "even before the man knows that he is bound to make it. Nothing surprises her except abstention. After all, it is she that gives the temptation and she knows its power."

"Do you mean to say that a woman can always stop the man before he speaks?" again said Lord Farstinfield. "Surely she weakens her own last line of defence, if she admits her knowledge of his intentions."

"Oh! there are a thousand shades of meaning," rejoined Brinson. "And a nice woman can always find the right moment. After all, on our assumption, she is dealing with men that understand and can see a hint, not with savages or degenerates."

There was still a smile of scepticism on Farstinfield's lips, and some of the rest of us showed a silent agreement. Brinson looked round, and the crinkles at the corners of his mouth drew up into broader lines.

"Well, well," he said, "it's a lazy afternoon anyway. A little psychology will do you good, I'm sure, so I'll tell you what once happened to me, as an instance of my meaning. I was very young when it happened, so that I can hardly be accused of vanity now for its repetition, and as I shall not tell you the right names, it cannot do any one any harm."

He filled up his pipe again and set it alight and drawing. Then, half closing his eyes and leaning back on the cushions, he began his story.

"Many years ago, more years than I now care to recall, I knew the Fillars in Upper Brook Street. He was a barrister, a thin hard man, with lots of briefs and high fees, a keen man on winning money, hard-working as they make them, cold

and bitter, and sarcastic, a thin man you may say, morally as well as physically. He was about forty then—my age now—a bad age for a man, the age when his character breaks, so to speak, and becomes either shrill and harsh or round and full and resonant. His character had all turned thin and squeaky. She was only twenty-three, lithe and graceful, a thing of slender curves and soft movement. Harshness would make her quiver, as I have seen a bamboo clump in India bend and wave at the breath of a scorching wind. She was fair, and the hair rippled gently round her forehead. Her eyes were light blue and soft and affectionate. She needed warmth, you would say at once when you saw her, warmth and love and constant affection,—tenderness, you know, not passion. And these were husband and wife, and it was to their house that I learned often to go and often to stay. I liked to go there about three, and have tea, and sit at the fire in winter while the greys drew in and the last ochre rays of the sun made the windows opposite flash like burnished brass, and the mist rolled up from the docks at the river-side and the flats at the mouth of the sea. Always we were alone, she and I. I had usually said good-bye before he returned. In the summer we sat by the open window and watched

carriages driving to the park, and cabs flying to Bond Street, and the men in the gutter selling yellow roses, marguerites, and fresh red strawberries. Sometimes she would come with me to Ranelagh or Hurlingham, and I used to take her for tea to a little place off Bond Street. We saw a lot of each other, and we talked of books and pictures, and the world, and men and women. All the old, old story, in a word. Theirs was a quiet house, and there were not many visitors. But I was young then, and perhaps I did not appreciate it all as I should have. How I should like that life again now—could I have it! Bah! I have lived my life, and I am forty, and yours is the only decent coffee in England, Farstinfield.

"Usually it has been my experience—and I suppose it is the experience of most men—that when you like a woman and begin to find her tempting, and the idea of making love to her presents itself pleasantly as you lie in bed in the morning and dream of impossible things—then by some curious fatality you find yourself growing to like the husband. As you go to their house and play billiards with him in the evening, as you drink his claret and smoke his cigars, you discover what a decent fellow he really is. Just about

the time when you begin to listen for the tread of the woman's step as she runs down the stairs, you find yourself pulled up sharp with 'Confound it all, he's a friend of mine too.' After all, the two of them are usually in unison, and her life pervades his and her attributes are mediated to you through the husband. It's natural enough that he should become your friend. So you end by remaining friends—friends and nothing more—with them both. As a matter of fact, I am sure most nice women know this and play their best to obtain this result. For certainly they like their husband's friends to admire them, and they like their admirers to mellow into friends and approved companions. It's natural enough. As one grows older, it ceases even to be annoying. One likes it oneself, in fact.

"But with the Fillars it was different. The more I saw of him, the more I disliked him. Sometimes I could barely even be civil. He talked a lot, in a cold, rational sort of way, about duty and the seriousness of life; and as far as I could see, his meaning was only negative, only the avoidance of pleasure and force and colour and vividness, of everything in fact which makes life significant and full and good. Duty for him was to work and work, all for the sake of money and

position. Thrift—the abstention from present happiness for the sake of a certain future of debility—thrift and prudence and respectability, that was all his nasty little atrophied soul would hold. He was half machine, half Puritan; in any case, not a living, being, feeling man. For women too he had a negative ideal, an ideal of living death, which he had the impudence to glorify with fine names. He spoke before his wife of the innate nobility of women, and he meant by it ignorance, superstition, cruelty. 'The refining influence of a pure woman,' he used to declaim; but their purity meant for him the denial of feeling and the stifling of passion, not its elevation and divinity. The refinement which a good woman, a thing of emotion and sensuousness and courage and honour, throws on the world as the Atlantic flings its ozone over exhausted fields and dirty villages and brutal brick towns, of this he knew nothing, could guess nothing. When he entered the room, light went out of her eyes, and the corners of her lips grew straighter and thinner. When he stood beside her, she looked suddenly pinched and older. She was like a sun-flower, plucked from its stem and suddenly taken into a darkened room. No, I simply could not endure him.

"As the summer went on, we became more intimate, she and I. I could see she liked me, trusted me. She would lay her hand in a close, natural sort of way on my arm, and tell me little confidences and ask me for little favours. She used to bring down her son—for she had a child, a nice little boy with merry eyes and brown hair—and let him play in the drawing-room with his toys, while we sat and watched and talked of life and the grace and beauty of life. I helped her a little, I think, as I look back and see ourselves as we then were, fresh and eager, looking with astonished eyes on the infinite opening world. Her education had after all been a girl's, and her taste needed guiding and broadening. She had still to reach a wider understanding, a more sensitive sympathy with the heights and depths of human experience and human emotion. We went hand in hand down the path of knowledge, and it seemed like a flowery, woodland lane, where even the sheen of the snake's coils gliding under the roots of the thorn-bushes had its value and its meaning. We could, when we paused to listen, hand in hand, almost hear the rhythms of the universe rise and fall over our life as the pulse of a being may feel to the cells of which it is composed. In any case, I think it is certain that her nature

deepened and broadened under my influence. She had been frozen before, and maimed and repressed. Love of all things that live came to us with the beginning of our love. She learned to see life as a whole, and to be bold and unashamed even before things that are hidden and things that are ill. I never believed in the seclusion of women, mentally at any rate. For the harem of a Mussulman prince there is, perhaps, something to be said. That is, after all, a prison only of the body, and it is gilded and made luxurious. But for the Puritan prison of the soul, what can be said? It is more humiliating than a thousand padlocks, more destructive than the sack and bowstring. So very often I was to her as a man known and united, revealing the secrets which a woman expects from her husband, sweet and significant on the lips of love.

"Her little boy was fond of me too, and that was another bond between us. She had been married young, under the skilful prompting of her mother. Marriage had brought her little other gain, loss rather and pain, but it had given her one hope and one consolation, her son. He was at that time just over four, and devoted to his mother. I used to bring him little toys and sweets, and he would climb upon my knee and

beg to be played with, and hold up his rosy round cheeks to be kissed. His mother used to watch him while he played with me.

"In the summer I had to go down to my place for a bit, and then I went to Scotland. The Fillars went to Normandy and looked at cathedrals. I fancy he found something congenial in the monotonous orchards of sour apples and the thrift and cunning of the Norman peasant. Her letters to me spoke mostly of the dirt, the sordidness of the villagers' lives, and their dull pedestrian democracy. We met again in November in town, when the dingy stone is poetized by the mists, and the lamps in the streets are like pale aureoles over the dusky shadows of living men. I hunted less than usual, and again spent the afternoons mostly at their house. The absence had made me feel more bitterly how I wanted her, and the thought of her husband was rather an incentive to give her some joy, some real love. I can still see her eyes smiling tenderly, as I caught them when I suddenly looked up from a book.

"One day in December—it was the fourth of December—I was sitting with her as the twilight stole grey and heavy into the corners of the room. Claud—the boy—was as usual playing on the floor, but he was quiet and rather sleepy. We had

had tea, and sat on an old-fashioned couch beside the fireplace. It was covered with green-figured velvet, I remember, and was studded with round brass nails. We were silent a little, and I looked at her profile lit against the shadows by the red glow of the fire, while the rain pattered against the window. Then she went to the piano and began to play. It was a Prelude that she played, you remember how it goes. When she got to the melancholy throbbing of the middle passage I rose suddenly and came behind her, looking down upon the yellow ripples of her hair. She looked backwards into my eyes. The music died below her fingers, and she slowly rose. Then she went back to the fireplace and looked into the fire, her toe upon the fender. I had never before properly understood how shapely her foot was. I still leant against the music chair. I was not conscious of thought, but I was all throbbing with one great, almost unimaged desire, to go to her as she stood and seize her and feel her lips, cool and refreshing, upon my mouth.

"Then suddenly she turned and spoke. Her voice had a note, of something strained, that I had not heard before. But she smiled and spoke quietly as of things without significance.

"'You know, Jack,' she said, 'there is one

thing I can never understand. However a woman be treated by her husband, I cannot understand her going to another man, if she has a child.'

"My eyes followed hers to Claud playing on the floor. He smiled upon us as we looked, and showed us a house of cards he had built. My mood dropped to the natural, reasoning mind of every day, and I saw what she meant. I spoke of ordinary things as quietly as I could for a few minutes, without sitting down again. She also stood quietly leaning one hand upon the mantelpiece. I saw sadness in her face, but also the light of a great love and a great trust. Then I said 'good-bye' sadly, for with it I said farewell to a dream that was passing. And the dream had been pleasant.

"As I opened the door, she moved again quickly to me. I half turned back, my hand still upon the door-knob. Quickly she placed her hands round my shoulders and drew down my face.

"'Good-bye, my dear, true friend,' she said. And she kissed me full and long on the lips. Then she pressed me upon the shoulder and I found myself walking down the stairs. At the first landing I looked back. The door was still open,

and I could see her kneeling upon the floor, her son tight pressed against her breast. I went down and walked out into the rain."

Brinson stopped and turned upon the grass and filled his pipe again slowly. When he turned, his lips had his usual smile, but the eyelids looked a little tired.

"It's been rather a long and dull story, even for a Sunday afternoon," he went on. "But there is not much more to tell. I saw that the parting was definitive, and I never called again. It would have been impossible. We met a few times at other people's houses and spoke a few words, nothing much, only a look of the eyes for renewal of the bond. But we both rather avoided such meetings, and gradually we drifted out of each other's set. It's easy enough to lose each other, when one desires, in London. She went out as little as possible, and I think Fillar was disappointed with his wife. She was not as good as he could have hoped at her social duties. For me it's some consolation that I have been able to help on her son a bit in the Service. He does not remember me, and I don't think he knows I have helped him. It's not much of a story, is it? and I am afraid it does not sound very like me. But there it is, and it's true."

He stopped, and Farstinfield handed the liqueurs round.

"Were you right, I wonder?" murmured Preston.

And Brinson answered. "We have both been changed ever after by that action, I suppose, as we are by all our actions, and our minds have always been one through that thought. Can love ever be vain, do you think?"

A KISS

A KISS

It was raining, slowly, dismally, and the dark pavement glistened like steel under the moisture. The hoofs of the horses sounded gloomily on the greasy wood, and the drivers in their waterproof hoods and capes bent their heads against the drizzle. Through the haze on the cab-windows one could just see the misty outlines of a pink opera-cloak, a marabout round a white neck, or the glowing end of a cigarette. Even the women with scarlet lips at the side of Charing Cross had been driven home, despairing, by the pitiless rain. At the corner I saw only one wretched girl, her cloak and skirt gathered up to display a draggled petticoat, expectant of the wayfarer whose drunken kisses might pay for to-morrow's meal. I shivered, and my whole being was sick with the need for fire and light and company; above all, for curtains and strong shutters to exclude the drip of the rain and the cold dampness of the streets. I turned down a side street and pushed open the doors of the Zulu Club. I had been

abroad, and this was the first time for three years that I was within its walls. The old hall-porter looked up and recognized me.

"Back again, sir? you've been away quite a tidy time."

"How are you, Jennings?" I said, as I walked in. "You look very fit. Any one in yet?" For it was not quite midnight, and the Zulu Club keeps late hours. Journalists, painters, musicians, actors, its members are generally found in its cosy bar any time between twelve and three in the morning.

"A few upstairs, sir," he answered, "in the old place, sir, under the clock. Seen Mr. Bennet yet, sir? He 's upstairs."

I hung my coat and hat up on the pegs and went upstairs. How warm and cheerful, how jolly it all looked and felt. I could hear loud laughter before I opened the door and looked in. Who does not know the Zulu Club, with its walls covered with assegais and kukris and knobkerries and all the trophies of savage warfare? And amongst them are hung the wittiest of caricatures, and the best of black-and-white sketches, an autograph portrait of Liszt, a letter from Irving, a butterfly from Whistler, and I don't know what else. There on the couch sat Bennet, red of face,

bald, a genial grin on his broad lips, and the eternal cigar between his teeth. Best of fellows and wildest of Bohemians, his ready hand and his caustic tongue were at every one's service, to help a friend out of a difficulty or to snub impertinence and folly.

"What! the prodigal back!" he roared in his hearty voice as he gripped me by the hand. "Waiter, one fatted calf with soda for the prodigal son."

The waiter grinned as he brought me a whisky and soda. I sat down beside Bennet on a couch above which ticks the old wooden clock that had been with the special correspondents through the Russo-Turkish war. Opposite hangs an enormous carved club, brought back by an itinerant doctor with literary tastes from Melanesia. The tradition is that the president uses it to quell the ardour of refractory members after the weekly dinner. As we sat, man after man came in, weary from marking proofs or from playing in draughty theatres, all tired but all noisy, and certainly thirsty. There was Moriarty from the *Post*, red-headed, fiery, and expletive; Innington-Smythe from the *Thunderer*, with his side-whiskers and pinched lips; De Burghe, the actor-manager, unctuous and rather important, but a pleasant enough fellow at bottom.

And we talked and talked, of the latest "show", of "copy", of the men who had made successes, the men who were doing honest, good work in poverty, and with it all, of the poor devils who had "gone under".

Suddenly Bennet turned to me.

"Talking of luck," he said, "you remember Tivetson, don't you?"

I looked a little puzzled.

"Oh! You know. Tivetson, the musician, pianist, great artist, bit of a composer, taught at the Imperial School of Music."

Then it suddenly came back to me. I remembered him now.

"A tall, thin man, with grey eyes, very quiet and dreamy? Yes, yes, I remember him. He was supposed to be one of the greatest musicians in England, wasn't he? but he hadn't proper luck or something. Couldn't make a success on the platform, and had to resign himself to teaching. Oh! I remember Tivetson all right. What about him? He must be doing well, isn't he? He was too quiet to go wrong."

"What 's the matter with him?" echoed Bennet. "That he 's ruined, finished, dead to the world, that 's what 's the matter with him. Have another drink, sonny, and I 'll tell you all about

him. It 's an interesting case—shows what trifles we hang on in life.

" Yes, Tivetson was quiet enough, too quiet perhaps. He was gentle and dreamy, and, like all musicians, he was romantic and sentimental. You can't touch music without being sentimental, unless of course you play in a brass band. And even then the kettle-drums have been known to shed tears during a clarionet solo. Musicians live in a different world from the rest of mankind. They listen to hidden beautiful rhythms in nature, and on their lips the stress of vibrating emotion turns to the sweetest of melodies, and the pangs of passion are transmitted to the assonance of deep chords. In the ultimate resolution of natural discord lies their hope and their aspiration, and the harmony of the spheres reverberates tenderly to their ears. Sometimes unhappily they confuse the particular with the universal, and imagine real accords of beauty where there is but painted canvas stretched over shoddy rame-work. With their eyes fixed upon the stars, they are blind to the gutter at their feet. That was the case with Tivetson.

" Tivetson was rather good-looking, too, in a way. When he was playing, his face would light with a kind of rapture. He would throw his head

back and his eyes looked forth to an edifice of harmony which he seemed to feel, and his fine profile, with the aristocratic nose, thin nostrils, and full half-opened lips, became transfigured with a nobler life. At such a time a girl could well fall in love with him. Poor Tivetson! a girl did fall in love with him for a moment, had her senses drawn to him perhaps, and that was his ruin.

"He was a widow's son, you may remember, and had always been at home till he went as a young man to study in Paris and Vienna. He was a favourite pupil of Letchetizky, and had many pictures and letters from the master. Diffident and shy, he lived only for music, and he was never seen with his fellow-pupils at the brasseries and cafés chantants. He returned to England and his mother nearly as fresh and innocent as he had left.

"They were well-connected people, the Tivetsons, and it was easy for him to get into good society and to obtain good engagements. A duchess met him and was pleased, and recommended him to all her friends. The critics liked his pleasant, unassuming manners and gave him nothing but praise. As he showed no signs of envy and was never bitter, he was popular even

with other musicians. Success seemed to be waiting for him with outstretched hand. And yet he was not successful. Perhaps he was too quiet, too reserved. At any rate the public, the great paying public, called him scholarly and found him dull. They said that he played very correctly and very exquisitely, but they found him lacking in fire, which is often another name for fireworks.

"His impresario, Montague, tackled him once about his failure with the public.

"'What you want,' said Montague, 'is pose. You do things too naturally. Keep that for the drawing-room and your friends. But the public doesn't want music, it wants playing. It wants to look at the player and see him throb with effort, and bring his hands down crashing on the piano. It wants to be impressed. Walk on to the platform as if in a trance, and off it as if the audience were the dirt beneath your feet. Change the time of the pieces you play, and add ornaments of your own to Chopin. Then the public will swarm to hear and still more to see you, and crowds will be turned away at the doors.'

"'I can't do that,' was all that Tivetson could say. 'You see, after all, I am an artist, and I can't play except for the love of music. And I hate pose. I don't think I even know how to

pose, if I wanted to. But '—and here the sentimentalist came out—' you can't be right. In the end people will always recognize what is good. They may be blinded for a moment, but they must come back to art when they have recovered their sight.'

" ' Don't mistake me,' answered Montague. ' I am not asking you to do anything wrong. Play as well and artistically as you know how. Only do it with an air, make it look difficult and unusual, and give the public some excitement for their money.'

" ' I cannot,' was again the answer. ' I must play what is in my heart. I should only lose what I have, if I tried to do otherwise.'

" Montague lost his temper then.

" ' All I can say is, you will be a failure, a dead failure, and it 's all your own damned fault. You have the talent and the art, and you haven't got the ordinary sense to use it to its best advantage. I tell you straight, in another year you won't draw, and you 'll have to give up concerts and take to teaching. I won't help you, if you refuse my advice.'

" And all that Tivetson said was : ' Very well, I shall take to teaching. I 'll look for an appointment at once. Good-bye.' And away he walked,

leaving Montague staring. Montague had met an artist for once.

"Well, that was Tivetson all over.

"It was about this time, when he had already resigned himself to the abandonment of the platform and saw his future in a life of mediocrity—a teacher well paid, no doubt, and respected—that he met the young lady who became his wife. Miss Etherington was the daughter of a country vicar, and venerated the county families as the visible embodiments of God. She had learnt enough at home and at school to have lost the small power of original thought which lurks even in the most feeble of children. Her mind was bounded by the limits of the country middle-class, and her horizon was but the pruned hedge of the social decalogue. She had no idea that events could ever come which were not to be written off by the rules of ordinary convention. Life appeared to her like a demarcated field, and she never dreamt of wild flowers blowing freely in untrimmed woods and bosquets. Passion she could not represent to herself, and could think of only as an abstraction, as something low and disgusting, the mark of the beast stamped on the brow of drunken labourers and sinning farm-servants. That passion, that strong emotion even, could touch a lady of a

respectable condition would to her have seemed an impossible fantasy. In a word, she was stupid, prim, narrow-minded. Tivetson mistook her want of feeling for purity and her lack of brains for womanly virtue. He was romantic, you see, and thought of women in a curiously unnatural abstract way. It never struck him that a good woman should be as much alive as a man. Well, they drifted together a good deal and Tivetson began to broider his visions upon the commonplace fabric of her being. She knew that he had a great reputation and was supposed to be of unusual talent. In her experience repute and ability had always stood for wealth, position in the county, power to make a tolerable speech, and to voice, with heightened expression, the conventional opinions of her class. Of reputation without worldly rewards, of talent that bursts the cage of habit and soars up to the skies, she had absolutely no conception. Art was to her only a profession, a means of livelihood, in an unexpected way rather admired because rather rare, but still essentially of the same kind of activity as practising at the bar or managing a brewery. She pictured the musician working for a certain number of hours per day at his profession, and then shaking it off and coming home to his wife and

dinner, the papers or a quiet evening with a few friends just like any one else she had ever known. To have talked art out of professional hours she would have thought bad form, and to have shaped one's life by it would have simply struck her as improper. But as she had no opinions of her own, and repeated the words without content which she had been accustomed to hear, Tivetson thought she had fine innate taste that only needed a little educating. If she was a little foolish and her remarks sounded thin, that was but the sign of her charming innocence, of a nature that had not yet vibrated to the touch of love. And unconsciously he talked to her with that artificial restraint by which all men show deference to the ingrained ideal of girlhood. They were both quite ignorant of each other when they married.

"'Will you marry me?' he asked her on the day he proposed in the corner of the orchard near the village. 'I cannot offer you much, only an artist's life, but your grace and innocence would inspire me. Your care would make the way smooth for me.'

"In a flash the vision set itself before her mind of what she expected her life to be as his wife. She felt the charm of being received everywhere with an added deference as the famous musician's wife.

She saw herself waiting in the artist's room at the end of a triumphant concert and felt a vicarious thrill at the sound of rapturous applause. They would drive home to the nice house—small, of course, but tasteful and modish—which they could rent in Mayfair out of his earnings on the platform. Some artists, she heard, made as much as £10,000 in one year. And all through the season they would be asked everywhere, for everyone would wish to have Tivetson, the composer and virtuoso; and she would be a good wife to him, always smart and neat and ladylike, and keep his house well, so that people would seek her invitations and be proud of her acquaintance. She pictured her life like that of the wife of the local member of Parliament, a baronet's lady and one of the oldest families in the county.

"So she whispered, 'Yes, dear,' as she bashfully looked at the ground and held her cheek to be kissed.

"Well, they married, and it did not take long before they both felt disappointed, although Tivetson for some time would not confess it even to himself. She had, of course, never felt any passion for him. She had not it in her to feel. He might have felt it, but she checked every moment of expansion as only a cold woman can. Love

itself, apart from the accidental surroundings of marriage, she thought distinctly disgusting, and she never hesitated to say so.

"'Of course you are an artist,' she used to say, making allowances for him in a tone as if she were speaking to a cripple or a lunatic, 'but please do try to remember that a gentleman doesn't behave in this way.'

"And Tivetson was too sentimental, too tender, to tell her the truth, to tell her that she was only half-developed and wholly ignorant, that it was her duty to train herself for real life and to try to feel and think like a real living woman.

"At the end of a year a child was born, a girl, over whom Tivetson used to gloat in rapture. He would lean over the cradle, eagerly spying for every smile, watching the fat cheeks bend and dimple, weaving dreams of joy round the little head where the first curls were just shedding a light as of sun-rays. His wife thought him rather foolish about the child sometimes. A man in a nursery, except at intervals, struck her as something unhealthy, exotic. She did not dislike him on that account, but she could not help feeling a little contemptuous. There were, she thought; so many other things for a man to do. Then Tivetson definitely gave up the platform

and accepted an engagement at the Imperial School of Music. They took a house in what is really Notting Hill, but calls itself Kensington on its visiting cards. This was Mrs. Tivetson's first real disappointment. That marriage had brought her no joy, that her husband's character was not in harmony with hers, these things had left her almost, if not quite, untouched. She had always felt that men were, after all, at best poor creatures, and she looked to marriage chiefly for an establishment and tolerable, fairly placid, companionship. The first sign of vehemence or violence would affright her, would make her close up like a sensitive plant at the touch of a peasant's fingers. She was prepared for a certain coldness, which she would have described as proper conjugal affection. It was only when Tivetson, under the influence of fine music, a glorious spring day, a flower, any of these little things that would make his pulses leap, burst the bonds of the constant restraint in which he consented to remain in the presence of his wife, when he showed enthusiasm and his face lit up with the old fire, it was only then that she felt doubts, anxieties. At such times she did have an intuition of some force, she knew not what, with which she was in too dangerous a contact. However, her real disappointment

came when Tivetson announced, with irrefutable facts at his back, that he must look to teaching for his future income. Then indeed she felt as if she had been tricked, as if she had been married upon false pretences. Of course she was determined that nothing should make a difference to her actions. She knew her duties as a wife, and, with God's help, would fulfil them in any station to which He was pleased to call her. If her husband was a failure and could not give her what she had expected, she would all the same care for his interests and watch his household as before. Nevertheless, at the bottom of her heart, unacknowledged, repressed at once when obtrusive, there grew and grew a dull feeling of hatred to the man who had disappointed her; worse still, a bitter contempt. She repeated dutifully, 'Those whom God has joined,' but she became accustomed to an habitual view of things as they might have been, as they might still be, were they but put asunder.

"For two years things went on much in the same way, a growing contempt and an increasing bitterness on her side, Tivetson, on the other hand, ever more reserved, more repressed, less expansive. But his work kept him busy and gave him occupation. He was doing very well, with

a steady income at the school and numbers of private pupils of a good reliable class, who could be counted upon to recommend friends and relations year after year. His income left him, after paying all expenses, a tolerable margin in which to save, and his future, if dull and rather joyless, was at least free from anxiety. He had still his old artist friends, with whom he could occasionally meet at the club and spend an hour or two in the old lively discussions and enthusiasms. But he looked rather worn, and the lines of his face betrayed a growing habit of listlessness and despondency.

"And then into his life came the girl. Never mind who she was; her Christian name was Ethel. She was just over eighteen, fresh from one of those fashionable finishing schools which rouse every curiosity in a girl. Remember her age. Boys and girls are all very much the same in those years, morbidly inquisitive of life, gloating over improperly learnt knowledge, innocently vicious, over-stimulated. Ethel had black hair, which hung thick over her temples, lips red as if they had just been bitten, and eyes deep down in which dwelt a spark of fire, like a red lamp seen in the caverns of a mine. She looked beseeching, languorous, sprightly, mischievous, all by turns;

but always there was a vicious light in her glances. She was slender, unhealthily thin, perhaps, for a girl, and her skin was too white, as if her blood were consumed by the fire of her eyes. Her people were very rich, of the city type which verges on smart society, which drives in the Park, teas at Rumpelmayer's, has supper at the Carlton. Their house in town was always crowded with women of the racing, card-playing sort, and men who did nothing but dress and draw dividends. Over the hum at the tea-table she could hear the history, true or otherwise, of every pretty actress, the piquant details of the latest divorce case.

"She came to the Imperial School of Music daily at half-past three for her piano lesson, driving up usually in her mother's coupé. There is this to be said for her, that she was genuinely fond of music, or at least of some music. She would sway, her eyes half closed, to the melancholy elegances of a Chopin nocturne. In the Cantique d'Amour of Liszt she would listen to the infinite emotions she was yet to seek, and a soft languor loosened her limbs as she heard. The Duet of Tristran and Isolde, the only music perhaps which can truly be called immoral, would leave her breathless, exhausted by the strain of emotion. She at least could feel, feel but unhappily always with

the morbid twist of the vicious schoolgirl. And Tivetson's very reserve and quiet attracted her. As has been said, he looked almost transfigured when he played. She liked to make him play, while she crouched at his side on a low chair and watched the line of his profile against the light. She made herself soft to him, appealing.

"'How attractive you are,' he said to her one day. 'I wonder if you know what you will mean to a man some day.'

"She looked into his eyes. 'Do you think I could mean much to a man?' she asked, and her voice sounded as if full of soft longings. Then she smiled suddenly, as if a breeze had rippled over a deep pond. 'But you are married,' she laughed.

"Gradually Tivetson fell more and more under the charm. Think of the deadly monotony, day after day, of hearing always girl after girl playing the same pieces, making the same mistakes, in the same dingy schoolroom. And then the one girl, with her neat dress, her delicate wrists and fingers, the little feet on the pedals, the budding friendliness upon her lips. Ethel brought him, as she stepped lithely into the room, a throb of life, a sense of pulsing blood, of quickness and vivid nature. She was a very woman, from the hair on her head to the turn of her heel, and she could

not help using her attractions. In her sensuousness, her frank confession of sex was her appeal. At home there was only coldness, at best respect, too often indifference, even bitterness. Here was youth, passion, poetry. No wonder he credited her with more than she had, and she had already much. Day by day, they talked more and learned less. Finally, he began to confide in her. Through his speech she could shape the image of his wife, know his home, see their disharmony.

"It happened finally on the last day of term. The lesson was over; he had said good-bye. Regret, sorrow, stole over him. Never had she looked so pretty and so sweet as now, in the middle of the dusty, dingy room, a fur toque upon her head, stooping to the violets in her muff. But he turned with a sigh from the picture, which already meant too much to him, and opened the door to let her out. She followed slowly.

"'Will you help me on with my cape?' she said, her figure apoise, her arms at stretch, her lips half pouting challenge, half tremulous with farewell.

"He bent over her from behind, the cape in his hands and laid it gently upon her shoulders. His face was near her ear, and the scent from the warm neck was like strong wine. 'Are you not going

to say good-bye properly?' whispered the girl, tilting her head softly backwards. Her eyes, those wonders of coal and fire, were looking into his. Flesh could no longer endure. His lips met hers and he felt her teeth sharp pressing upon his. The tip of her tongue thrilled his mouth with sweetness. For a minute he strained her in his arms, lips firm upon lips. They had both forgotten the open door. Such are the trifles which determine destiny. The Director, passing in the corridor, saw their kiss.

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"Of course no scandal was allowed to arise. The girl went home quietly. But, equally of course, Tivetson had to go. You could not have masters, married too at that, kissing their pupils at the Imperial School. He recognized that himself, and at once offered to leave. His resignation was accepted on the ground of ill-health. Then he had to go home and tell his wife. Through her fury she saw the hatefulness of their common life and shaped the image of deliverance.

"'You could so far forget yourself and your duties,' she cried, 'as to kiss a girl, one delivered to your care. And I am to suffer for your immorality, I and your child. But you have always been the same, weak, immoral, ungentlemanly.

Now I know why you were so anxious to take up teaching. You were not satisfied with a wife and a decent home. You needed mistresses. You wanted to seduce schoolgirls. What a hideous mistake I made!'

"Tivetson did not try to defend himself.

"'It has all been a hideous mistake, my dear,' was all that he said. Then he left the house and dined at the club. For the first time in his life he drank too much that night. Finally he went with a friend to the night club in Oxford Street, where the shutters are always drawn and the cabs wait outside a closed door till three and four in the morning. In the bare room, where tired drabs in low silk dresses dance wearily with fast men, he drank again glass after glass of bad whisky. A girl took him to her rooms in Ridgemount Gardens in the early morning. When he returned home, white, haggard, disgusted, his wife had already left. The little daughter she had carried with her.

"They were separated, of course, and Tivetson settled his savings on the child. The scandal got about, as is the habit of scandals, necessarily in an exaggerated form. His private pupils also left him, and he was no longer invited to good houses. His mind was poisoned and he sought

and found distraction in strong drink. Now he thumps a piano at a suburban music-hall with tremulous hands. Luckily he cannot last much longer."

Bennet stopped and lit another cigar.

"What about the girl?" I asked. "What became of Ethel?"

"Oh! She has done very well," he answered. "She has married a rich man, also in the City, and has every luxury she can want. Of course her husband is rather a fool. To her Tivetson was only one of the experiments of her nonage. All the same I wonder if she is happier than he."

FAMILY HONOUR

FAMILY HONOUR

THE two old ladies walked quietly down the village street, while the sun of an Indian June struck fiercely on sandy roads and whitewashed walls. Some dogs lay panting, their legs at stretch, in the scanty shadows cast by the thatch of cottage roofs. The villagers sat half unclothed on rope-woven bedsteads within the doorways.

The oilman looked up as they passed his door and allowed the blindfolded ox a moment's respite from his round. As he rubbed the sweat from his brow with the back of his oily hand, he bent against the unhewn beam which served as pestle to his mill, and asked respectfully after their health.

"Thanks be unto God," replied the elder with grave, low-modulated voice. "May His peace be with you also and with all your house." Then, after a pause, "How is the son? He did not come to us last night for sweetmeats."

"Nay, he was in disgrace, and the housewife was

angry and would not let him away. He will be running to you again to-night, have no doubt. Indeed you spoil him. He becomes daily more wild."

"All the better then for a man child," smiled the younger. "Shall not a man be wild and brave?"

For a few minutes more they talked, gently smiling, to the oilman. Then he asked them what they thought of the season and the ominous delay in the rains. "Surely it is time that the rains be nearing," he said. "Yet even in Bombay, they say, is no sign of cloud. God grant that the rain fall soon. The land is very parched, and it is bitter for such as labour in field or in mill."

They nodded their heads gravely, seriously.

"In His own good time will He send His favours and answer to our needs," again spoke the elder woman. "We are in the hands of the Almighty, and He counteth even the grains of sand. But rest you in peace. We must go homewards."

The oilman bowed with fond respect, and asked for their kindly remembrance as he turned again with a sigh to the ox and kern.

So slowly they wended their way through the village to the door of their own house with the antique carvings, greeted as they went with

respectful salutation, the service of sincere affection, by all the villagers.

Two sisters were these, both widowed, and both aged, second cousins of the landlord of the village; and descendants of the Prophet—on whom be the blessing of God. For five hundred years had their ancestors held and dwelled in the village of Jehanabad among the rich park-lands of Gujarat. Fertile was the red loam of the alluvial soil, rich in their season with millets, both the spiky and the full, with wheat, and with long, red-spotted rice in the watered acres, with barley and yellow-flowering cotton, and fine, full-flavoured tobacco. Round the limits of the fields, like hedges, the castor-oil plants raised their dentated leaves and bristly fruits; and near the wells, where the white bullocks hauled and strained through the summer day, pepper grew, and ginger, and yellow turmeric. And the fields and pastures, the paths and the country lanes, were shaded and made beautiful by lofty immemorial growth of trees, by banyans with their centuries of rooting branches, by mangoes plentiful in fruit, by tamarisk and barren fig. In the evening, as the sun declined to the plain, the rock-pigeons flew and circled in hundreds from their cool nests within the wells round tree and bush and threshing-floor. And the parrots

screamed and hurried in scurrying flocks, while the flying foxes flapped lazily through the grey air on the first ordered flight of the dark hours. For the land was rich, and great was the name and prosperity of their house.

For five hundred years had they thus dwelt in Jehanabad since first Lutfullah—"Grace of the Lord"—had come in his green turban, a poor student, to the royal city of Ahmedabad, and, by dint of shrewdness and integrity, had risen to be counsellor and minister, and had attained to wealth and honour and authority. From the regal viceroys of Gujarat had they held in fee-simple the lands and appurtenances of Jehanabad —with the rights of customs and excise, of watch and guard—and always had they dealt kindly and in amity with those of alien creed whom they ruled. In the days of calamity, when converted Mongol hordes from the steppes of Central Asia had broken their ice-bound barriers and burst like a blood-red river upon the trim borders and flowering beds of Persian and Indian culture, they had held and maintained their lands and their lordship. Even then had they remained unshaken when the Negrito races of the Deccan, worshippers of phallus and of animal gods, robbers of the mountain fastness and loiterers by

the mountain pass, had risen in revolt at the approach of civilization and borne fire and iron through Gujarat and Central India even to the walls of Calcutta and the palaces of Delhi. But peace has its difficulties, less evitable perhaps than those of war, and in the day of security the family had suffered reverses more serious than of battle. For they had multiplied exceedingly, and their substance was consumed in the provision of dowries, the payment of jointures, and the appanages of cadets. And loans had been easy to obtain, and a mortgage was but the scratch of a pen. And improved communications had brought to their doors the luxury of the city and the vices of massed populations. So the nominal owner of lordship and village idled away his time, thriftless and unheeding, indebted and debauched, among the harlots of the Ghi Kanta—the street of loose women in Ahmedabad—mortgaging ever further the future of his house, to the profits of the pander and the distiller. In the village, in a sort of haughty beggary, miserably poor, but wrapping the tattered shreds of nobility round them like a mantle, lived the cousins twice and thrice removed, the aunts and great aunts, the relations of consanguinity and the connexions by marriage, proudly hungering upon the proceeds

of fields which they held rent-free in appanage from the head of the house. And in turn they again had mortgaged to money-lenders these portions of their common patrimony. Now of these were the two ladies, Ayeshabi and Badrunnissa.

Ayeshabi was by six years the elder. Married as a young girl to another Sayad—one also of those who could trace their pedigree to the house of the Prophet and the martyred Hussein—she had been left at twenty a childless widow. Badrunnissa had been more fortunate in her wedding. For twelve years she had been happy in an honourable and cleanly poverty with her husband, a scholar in Persian and Arabic, a theologian well respected, and an expounder of the Sacred Law and the Commentaries. She had borne him a son, on whom she doted, and she made the house cheerful with song as she nursed her child or scoured the shining vessels of copper, and swept the bare rooms to the scrupulous attainment of a kind of worshipful neatness. In the evening, after supper, when the child had been laid to sleep, they would sit down hand in hand in the speckless chamber, and her husband would stroke the smiling oval of her cheek or pull the smooth black plaits of her hair to tease her.

"Light the lamp, little beloved of mine," he would say. "Light the lamp, and I will read you some of the odes of Hafiz."

Then she would rest her head on his shoulder and he would interpret for her the burning melodies of the Persian love-songs, and his right arm would press her tighter to his breast as he read of the moth burning itself in the candle of love, of the wine-bearer setting fire to the hearts of the singers by his eyes, of the absorption of soul in soul. And she would press him to her with a soft squeeze which could barely have injured even the wings of the love-lorn moth, but was powerful enough to fill his veins with red-hot passion and to make him cast away the book and swear that he found better poetry in her eyes and at her breast.

Sometimes he would come home and stand at the door with his hands behind his back.

"I was in the bazar to-day," he would say, "and I saw a lot of pretty things. And I thought of my naughty comrade at home and her bad son. And what do you think I have brought them?"

Then she would run into the kitchen and call her child and make him help her at guessing.

"What has your father brought us, little one?" she would whisper. "If you can guess aright,

you shall have some cocoa-nut sweets from your mother as well."

Then the child would lisp in his pretty childish way, and would try to climb round his father's legs and see what was in his hands. She would prompt him with the most impossible suggestions.

"Perhaps he has brought a flying carpet, or can it be diamonds, or gold brocade for a new jacket?" And every time he shook his head they would all laugh together, the child clapping his chubby hands as he saw his parents smile, and they laughing the more at his joy. And in the end, when the joke had lasted long enough, he would bring out a cheap bangle, or a yellow melon, or a new toy for the child. And there would be more pleasure at the simple little gift than for all the luxuries of the rich; for they were poor, and a present could be only the occasional purchase, by prudent economy, of a plain thing greatly desired and warmly welcomed. And when the child was gone she would press his hand and thank him, and he would lay her cheek to his, straining her in fondness to his breast.

Such for twelve years was the life of the younger sister. But one year of horror the cholera came to the country town where they lived. It lasted only a week, but a week was enough to make

havoc of many homes. In twenty-four hours it bereft Badrunnissa of her husband and child. Twenty-four hours before a happy wife and mother, she was left, blighted, a maimed life, widowed and childless. She had thought to die, but bore through it to a living deprivation. Then the two sisters met together, as finding consolation in seeking each other's comfort, and set up house in their former village. There they had now lived for twenty-six years in quiet tolerance of life, passively expectant of reward in death. The elder was now fifty-seven and the younger fifty-one years of age.

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For twenty-six years, during which they had both grown more shrivelled, more thin and feeble, such had been the daily manner of their life. The two fields which were theirs they had farmed out to a Hindu farmer. In the terms of rent they had not been exacting, and he paid them the price—in grain and in money—with punctuality each December. Of this a fraction was set aside for the purchase of the coarse white cotton clothes which formed their garments and for the hire of the tailor who cut and stitched their old-fashioned petticoat-trousers. With another fraction they laid in store of *babul*

wood for the kitchen, and against the cold of the winter evenings. Some of it, I fear, they expended on the purchase of home-cured tobacco, which they cut and mixed for themselves, for in the privacy of their house they were not above liking to smoke. Meat they had but little, except on the 'Ids or feast days of the Faith. Coarse home-cooked bread, washed down with milk and pickles, butter, stewed rice, plain cakes, and fruits, these were the staple of their sustenance. A small lad of twelve came each morning to their house, helped in tidying, did their rare errands to the village shop, and drove the milch-buffalo and the cow, which were their dearest possessions, to the common pasturage. In twenty-six years they had been seven times only to Ahmedabad, and they still recalled with excitement each detail of their doings in the wonderful city. On each occasion they had been busy with preparation a fortnight before, and had recounted their adventures and dreamt of the crowds in the bazar for a month afterwards. They talked, half tremulous, of going again soon for an eighth visit, but no excuse they could find seemed adequate. Their only pleasures were a proud cleanliness of the home and the respect of the villagers. They felt a luxury in the inconvenience which the veiling

and seclusion imperative to their class entailed, though they might to some extent abrogate, without abdicating, their nobility in the presence of friendly villagers. Before strangers or the inspecting officials that occasionally visited Jehanabad they insisted with pathetic pride on the formal observance of respectable seclusion. Chiefly they liked to have the children come of an evening, when they were tired of their game of ball, and chatter by the fire in winter or roll about in the verandah in summer, while they munched the sweetmeats which were always ready for them. Both had a fondness for children, but Badrunnissa had a tenderer, more intimate way with them. The children liked and respected Ayeshabi; but they greeted Badrunnissa with a more loving equality. To their surprise they had found compensation for old age, rather even a newly matured and unsuspected pleasure, in treating all the younger generation, even when they had become young men or married women, as their children. Those whom they had first known as naked little infants crawling in the dust and crowing with delight over mud-pies, had now grown to be in turn fathers and mothers without ceasing to know them with a certain childlike intimacy. In the kindly regard which they cast

upon the activities of the younger growing lives, they found their real entertainment.

"We come to you for help and advice," was a phrase that they often heard. "You are our mothers and we are your children. Scold us, do anything you like, but only love us and give us help."

A grateful tear would spring to Badrunnissa's eye, when she heard those whom she thought of as her children address her in such fashion.

If there was a circumcision, or a wedding, or a feast to celebrate a first pregnancy, it was always to the old ladies that the barber first came with the invitations. And close on his heels followed the father to press them to accept.

"We are too old now for feastings," Ayeshabi would answer for them both. "Old faces frighten away young joy. And widows are not meet for rejoicings."

"Nay, you would not be so unkind," he would answer. "You are our mothers, you know, and you must come. Without you there would be no pleasure. It is all arranged for you, and if you will not accept, my face will be blackened in the sight of the country-side." Then, with a feigned reluctance, they would accept. And

when he had gone they smiled at each other with a happy tenderness.

"They do love us well, our people," Badrunnissa would whisper, as she plaited and combed her sister's hair. "Perhaps we are not so unhappy after all."

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But the rains for which the oilman had prayed were long of coming. When a few showers fell, the farmers made haste with their plough and drill. But the clouds whirled past and the earth baked and cracked in the sun's heat. The seedlings shrivelled and were sapless, and the sprouting grass dried in the burning winds. Finally, the September rains also failed, and the peasants were left staring into the face of defeat. Agriculture has its reverses as dreadful as those of campaigns, and to them that are worsted in grips with Nature is no quarter given, and on the field no hospital equipped. They perish that fall out on the march, and for those that flee in the rout is no asylum except in death.

The province was new to famine, and its inhabitants mollified by long prosperity. Accustomed to have their needs lightly fulfilled in a smiling world, will with them had degenerated into wish. Of desire that extorts its purpose with

straining and striving from unkind material they had no idea. Life to them was a Lydian melody, and its discords but a few slurred accidentals. Now the red flash of dawn appeared fraught with the fires of the last burning, and the brazen stretch of the sky was like the devouring gorge of the famished. As they felt the cold touch of destiny's knife at their throats, they ran convulsively without purpose round the circles of despair. For they had no strength in them, and the novelty of this calamity was beyond their conception.

The cattle were the first to suffer. For some grain still remained for the people from last year's stores, and the seed that had been kept for sowing could be used for food when the season of the rains had passed. But the cattle were of good breed, large, and heavy, and fat, accustomed to eat rich stalks of millet and wheat. When they had only grass to graze they grew thin and wasted. But even the grass was stunted and scarce, and they had soon nibbled to the level of earth what they could find in the pastures and at the side of dykes and banks. The white of their coats grew grey and patchy, and the skin, taut stretched on their wasted quarters, fretted into sores over the sharp points of the bones. Every evening

Ayeshabi and Badrunnissa would exchange looks of dismay as they stood in the byre sifting some scanty bedding for the milch cow and the buffalo.

"We must do for the future without milk," Ayeshabi at last said one evening. "We shall only kill the poor beasts if we try to squeeze out any more from their drying udders. We must eat our bread without milk and keep them alive."

Then when they saw the fields were bare they tried to buy hay to store for their animals. But the price had gone up so much that they were horrified. So they bought as they needed and the price kept ever rising. Then they found that their own store of grain was diminished, and the moneys which they still had were expended on the nurture of their kine. And the people murmured, for they were bereft even of hope. Then the weaker of the village cattle sickened and died, and the breasts of the women were shrivelled and failed in suckling, and the infants grew thin and their eyes large in haggard faces. Those that were labourers took to wandering on highways, seeking work where there was irrigation or at the factory-doors of great cities. But as labour was wanted of most men masters reduced their wages, while

the prices of food kept rising. So to many it seemed better to starve in idleness with the occasional respites of beggary, than to toil and to die in fatigue more readily of hunger. And the happiest were those who, pilfering, found shelter and steady nourishment in the common jails. And the hearts of the farmers were melted when they thought of their cattle, and they went without food to buy grass for the animals that should plough in the coming year.

The administration had been hard to convince of the need for relief. Central authorities had been distrustful of the local officers and discredited their representations. As the province had been prosperous, even luxurious, they could not believe present reports of rapid collapse, of destitution and misery. Finally, at the end of December, relief works were opened. But they were few and at some distance, and the recipients of relief were compelled to live in huts on the works. As the people were soft and luxurious, there were many, even of the labouring class, that found this remedy more bitter by far than hunger. For they were amazed, and disaster had left them without volition. They needed tempting to their own salvation, and a road easy and smooth. Instead, they found only restrictions which were new and

so seemed harsh; and labour in conditions which they feared without attempting.

Chiefly the sisters feared for the children. One night, after they had heard of the opening of relief works, they brought Nagindas Patel, headman of the village, to their house to discuss the situation.

"To-day an order has come," he said, "by which I am allowed special pay on account of famine. For me it has brought safety. It is true that I may not receive the money for three months to come, for that is the wisdom of Government. But I shall at least be able to borrow on its security. I shall of course have to pay heavy interest. But it is better than nothing, and I can at least stay on in the village and fulfil my duties as headman."

"See you, Patel," said the elder sister, "that the labourers leave for the works and earn there enough for their families. Already the children are dying."

"I do my best, by the favour of God," answered the headman, "but they are afraid and are hard to move. And the clerks, be their breed accursed! practise extortion upon the unfortunate."

So they talked for some time of the works, and brought to their lips wild tales and distorted of

the sufferings of the poor and the robberies of the petty officials upon the works.

"What of yourselves?" said the headman, as he took his leave, "May God keep you from such ill, yet is there no fear for you?"

"The Almighty counteth the sparrows as they fly," said Ayeshabi, while the younger sister looked sad and cast her eyes on the ground. "He is the giver of all favours, and what fear need we have? Besides, have we not our family and our possessions, and have we not our rents to receive?"

"God send you safe," he answered. "His peace be with you."

He closed the door, and they could hear his footsteps echoing down the empty village streets. The two sisters clasped each other in a fond embrace; while tears ran down their cheeks.

"Whatever betide," said Ayeshabi, "promise me he shall never know, none of them shall ever know, that we suffer from destitution, and that the head of our family has refused to help us. Promise me, I am your elder sister; promise me, or I shall never have a moment's peace."

And "I promise," said Badrunnissa, solemnly, sorrowfully.

In January, as they had received no rent, they sent for their tenant, Ishwar. He was a quiet;

respectable man, slow of movement, even slower of speech, heavy of build, a man to be trusted, suggestive of hidden strength. But he was thinner now, and his mouth had a nervous twitch. He still had a look of stolidity, as of one bearing without cry the blows of fortune's scourge, but the surface had been cracked by the constant quiver of nervous strain.

He raised his clasped hands gravely to his brow, and stood respectfully with his arms folded till the ladies signed to him to sit down. Then slowly, with another bow, he bent his knees and sat down upon the ground at a polite distance near the door.

"You are late in bringing your rent, Ishwar," said Ayeshabi, "When are we to expect the payment?"

The man's fingers twitched, and he gulped at his Adam's apple before he spoke.

"Nothing has grown, and I must beg for your favour. I must have time."

"Time?" said Ayeshabi, in a tone of alarm, "time till when?"

His voice sank, as he looked at the ground in shame, his hand playing nervously with the sand on the floor.

"Till next year, lady, till next year." Then,

as he noted their silent dismay, he broke down, and his voice was hoarse with excitement and sorrow. "I should pay it all if I could, every penny, for I know you need it and you have always treated me well. But I have not a farthing in my house. I was never a saving man. The years were good and there seemed no need to save. What we received we ate with thankfulness, making full our bellies in happiness. And now that the rain has failed, I have nothing for my family in my house. My wife and the children have been out this last week plucking wild berries and grasses to stew. This is now our usual food. We have not enough to eat ourselves and we grow daily more weak. Whence am I to get the money for our rent? Were it not for the cattle, I had already gone to the relief works. I, a respectable farmer, of decent people always well regarded, I shall have to carry baskets of earth upon my head like a sweeper. It will kill my wife and my children."

The sisters looked at the sobbing man, so different from the sturdy tenant they had known so long. They knew what it meant to them. But they tried to comfort him, and they stuffed a parcel of flour for his children into his arms before they sent him away.

They did not speak to each other any more

that night. They could think only of one thing, saw before them only one thing—starvation—but each feared to infect the other with her own alarm.

The two old women walked less frequently down the village street now. When they did so, there were few left to greet them with salutation, few remaining to serve them with affection. For by February most of the villagers had had to decide for the one road of escape, and had abandoned their ruined homes for the famine camps. Of the cattle the most were dead. Those that remained, poor thin beasts that staggered rather than walked, were left in the charge of a couple of boys to whom the villagers sent once a week enough grain for their subsistence from the scanty savings of their relief works. Each grain of the corn they ate was the fruit of hunger among the workers. Only the headman, the village accountant, some of the village menials, and a few of the richer farmers whose lands were sufficient security for loans had been able to endure longer in the village. Even the Sayads—the descendants of the prophet and the cousins of the landlord—had for the most part silently packed up their goods and departed, Heaven knows where, to seek livelihood where they could under other names, perhaps in the

servile employment of earth-work. At each defection among their relatives, the sisters had grown more shamefast, more depressed.

"They have turned their eyes from the vision of honour," they would murmur sadly. "Such labour is not for the bearers of great names. The death of men is in the hands of the Creator; but shame and dishonour lie in a man's own will."

Daily they seemed more thin, more feeble, as their tattered cotton clothes flirted in the wind round their skinny legs and arms. When they walked hand in hand down the deserted village street, their steps would often falter and stop.

In April, the famine Inspector was talking with Nagindas Patel when he saw them pass. His eyes watched them as they disappeared slowly, feebly round the corner.

"They do not look well," he said. "Who are they? Do they not need help?"

The Patel told him their history. "But they will not accept assistance," he added. "They are of the blood of nobles, and they are too proud. I do not know how they live, but they speak of their rents and their connexions and profess they have all they need."

The Inspector was a man of conscience and

cared for his duties. He was really sorry for the famine-stricken; for he was young and of good fighting family, and had accepted the duties largely as a labour of love. As he did not belong to the official class, he had no private interests to further and did his work simply and sincerely, partly for its own sake, partly to satisfy the officer who, knowing and trusting him, had appointed him to the post without regard to official rules and routine observance. He went round later to see the sisters at their own house and proffer assistance from his discretional grant. Ayeshabi met him at the door, closely veiled, as in the former days of respectable seclusion.

"It is the bread of charity," was all she would say. "It is kind of you to have thought of us, but it is impossible, and we do not need it."

He would have insisted, but, in the end, quite politely, with all courteous expressions of her obligation at his visit, she shut the door firmly upon his face. He retired discomfited, to tell the headman of his defeat.

By the end of April Ayeshabi was no longer seen in the village. Badrunnissa appeared every day in the street, more feeble and more thin than ever, but smiling bravely through her sadness. When

the headman would have questioned her of her sister, she replied only :—

"She is sick of a fever and would be left alone in peace."

At last there came a day when Badrunnissa failed to appear in the village street. The headman was troubled, but feared to intrude where he was not wanted. But the next day also passed without her appearance. In the evening the headman went to her house with a village menial. The door was firmly closed and the shutters drawn. He knocked, but no answer was heard. Finally he decided to break the door. When they entered, the room was scrupulously clean as of yore. The floor was swept, and the copper vessels were scoured and stainless. In the second room on the bed lay Badrunnissa, the Qoran clasped in her hands upon her breast. Her face was strictly veiled against the visitors who should see her in her death. She had died of hunger twenty-four hours before. Of Ayeshabi they could find no trace. Finally in the Mussulman burial ground they discovered a new-dug grave. The elder sister had died first, and, mindful of her promise, Badrunnissa had had the desperate courage in the dead of night to bury her with the rites of the faith, herself carrying the emaciated

corpse, so that none should know of the family shame. They had feared, not the pains of hunger, but its obloquy.

In the village register stands the entry: "On the 30th of April died of fever, Badrunnissa, widow of a Sayad."

But the villagers remember them still.

THE END.

ALDEN & CO. LTD., BOCARDO PRESS, OXFORD.

INDIAN DUST.

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INDIA FROM WITHIN."

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LONDON: SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON, KENT & CO. LTD.

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on 15 October, 2018